

Building a Human Rights Culture
South African and
Swedish Perspectives

Karin Sporre &
H Russel Botman [eds.]

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Building a Human Rights Culture
South African and Swedish Perspectives

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CONTENTS

7 Introduction

KARIN SPORRE

ECONOMY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

20 Human Dignity and Economic Globalization

H RUSSEL BOTMAN

35 Economic Equality, Civic Traditions and Human Rights

ULF MAGNUSSON

DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP

54 Human Rights, Citizenship and Welfare: The Swedish Model

LARS PETTERSON

77 Curbing Women's Suffrage.

Expectations, Apprehensions and Strategies

JAN GRÖNDAHL

102 More Representation or More Participation?

Challenges in Swedish Democracy

ERIK AMNÅ

SOCIAL CONDITIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

128 Pretending Democracy. Learning and Teaching
Participation in Two Swedish Schools

ÅSA BARTHOLDSSON

142 Women in the Church. Solidarity in Suffering
in the Context of HIV/AIDS

MIRANDA PILLAY

164 Othering from Within – Sometimes Other,
Sometimes Not. On being a Young Turk in Sweden

JUDITH NARROWE

RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

179 Freedom of Religion and the Equality and Dignity
of Women. A Christian Feminist Perspective

DENISE M. ACKERMANN

194 Trinitarian Anthropology, Ubuntu and Human Rights

NICO KOOPMAN

GENDER ISSUES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

208 Different Space for Action – a Way to Understand Rape

STINA JEFFNER

220 The Vanishing Father. Changing Constructions
of Fatherhood in Drum Magazine 1951–1965

LINDSAY CLOWES

245 A Profile of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Human Rights

KATHY NADASEN

A HUMAN RIGHTS CULTURE

274 Sentiment and the Spread of A Human Rights Culture

J P ABRAHAMS

288 Women's Human Rights in Sweden – a Feminist Ethical Perspective

KARIN SPORRE

311 On a Human Rights Culture in a Global Era.
Some Ecological Perspectives

ERNST M CONRADIE

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WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS IN SWEDEN

A FEMINIST ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

BY KARIN SPORRE

One question – and another

In a global perspective, the Scandinavian countries are often seen as having made quite a lot of progress regarding equality between women and men. In Sweden, 45 % of the government posts in May 2002 were held by women. In 2000, the percentage of women in parliament was 44 % (SCB, 2002, pp 89, 84).¹ In the fall of 2002, three out of seven major political parties in Sweden had a woman as leader of the party.² In new elections in September 2002, the percentage of women in parliament increased by one percent to 45 %. Since 1921, when women received the right to vote and became eligible for all parliamentary bodies, Swedish women definitely seem to have made progress within the field of political representation. But is there more to be said concerning equality between women and men? In this article I intend to expand this discussion.

Harald Ofstad, a Norwegian-Swedish moral philosopher, was a professor at the University of Stockholm from 1955 to 1987. In introducing moral philosophy in his *Ansvar och handling. Inledning till moralfilosofiska problem*³ he wrote:

- 1 The statistics in this article comes from SCB, Statistics Sweden, who publish yearly statistics regarding equality between women and men in Sweden. One such publication is *På tal om kvinnor och män. Lathund om jämställdhet 2002*, (SCB, 2002). An English version is called *Women and Men in Sweden. Facts and Figures*. The most recent edition of the English publication is from 2000.
- 2 Gudrun Schyman leads Vänsterpartiet, a former Communist party, nowadays stating themselves to be socialist and feminist. Maud Olofsson leads Centerpartiet, formerly a farmer's party, which today strongly advocates development in all regions of Sweden. Maria Wetterstrand is one of two leaders of Miljöpartiet, a party focusing on environmental and ecological issues. The parties that have male leaders are the Social Democratic Party, the Liberals, the Conservatives and the Christian Democrats.
- 3 The title of Ofstad's work in English would be: Responsibility and Agency. Introduction to moral philosophical problems. When the cited works in my article do not exist in English I will offer a translation so as to give an idea of the meaning of the Swedish title.

Ethics is taking seriously that which is serious. What is serious is that human beings and animals suffer, are humiliated and do not fare well. Taking that seriously means getting involved, gathering as accurate knowledge as possible, and trying to act in such a way that the world may become less evil. (Ofstad, 1982, p 10), (my translation).

Here I will draw quite considerably on the thinking of this particular moral philosopher as well as bringing into the discussion a few womanist and feminist ethicists/moral philosophers, like Katie Cannon, Iris Marion Young and Beverly Wildung Harrison. I will also include statistics and two literary sources.

The first question I will discuss can be formulated thus: how come, in a society like the Swedish society, where women's rights have been developed legally and politically to a fairly advanced level, that women still are discriminated against? This question is in its turn influenced by a second one, namely: how to build a human rights culture? I address the questions as an ethicist and will start by illustrating and discussing the first question and conclude with the second. My perspective is feminist.⁴ However, I do not take it upon myself to solve the two questions, once and for all but I do hope my article will shed more light over the issues involved.⁵

I maintain that, when one takes a closer look, the positive picture of the situation of women in Swedish society can be challenged both qualitatively and quantitatively. When doing this I will use a narrative as well as a statistical approach, both methods commonly used by ethicists.⁶ When relating my discussion here to the explicit framework of human rights, an immediate background is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW, adopted by the UN, on December 18, 1979. Sweden signed it in 1980 and South Africa, in 1993. Now in 2003, 90 % of the UN members have signed the Convention. My discussion relates to the following articles of the Declaration: 11d/ and e/, 7b/, 6, 2d and e/, and the more general article no. 1. (For the full text, see <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/content.htm>)

4 I discuss my understanding of feminism in *Först när vi får ansikten – ett flerkulturellt samtal om feminism, etik och teologi*, (Eng. First when we have faces – a cross-cultural study of feminism, ethics and theology), (Sporre, 1999, pp 60–75, see also chapter 2 in total).

5 Some of the problems related to justice being done to women or not I have discussed in the concluding chapter of Sporre, 1999, pp 489–498.

6 For a thorough discussion of ethics and literature see Nussbaum, Martha, *Love's Knowledge. Essays of Philosophy and Literature*, (Nussbaum, 1990). Ethicists often use statistics to establish a factual background of problems we discuss.

The structure of my article evolves like this: first a narrative and a statistical description of the situation of women in Sweden; second, a presentation of some of the fundamental ideas of the moral philosopher Harald Ofstad, particularly focussing on what might be of importance when dealing with equality between women and men; third, a critical discussion concerning the question of how to build a human rights culture, aiming at identifying the crucial basic ideas of such a culture.

Two stories from literature

Two different literary sources⁷, *Slumpvandring* by Majgull Axelsson (Axelsson, 2000)⁸ and *Catrine och rättvisan*, by Hanna Olsson (Olsson, 1990)⁹ will here serve to narrate the situation of Swedish women. My underlying assumption is that literature and authors do reflect their own society and its actual tendencies.¹⁰

Mother Augusta and her relatives

Axelsson has achieved fame and recognition for works like *Aprilhäxan*¹¹ (Axelsson, 1997), *Rosario är död*¹² (Axelsson, 1989) and *Slumpvandring*. Several of her books have been translated into other languages such as Spanish, German, Dutch, Norwegian, Danish and others, and also into English. *Slumpvandring*, however, is so not yet available. Axelsson is characterized as an author who

7 To argue your choice of two certain literary sources always becomes difficult: there are a vast number of possible alternatives to the one(s) you choose. I have chosen, primarily, a novel, written by the author of several other novels which have been widely read and recognized. This particular one gives an overview of Swedish women's lives during the 20th century, which here can serve as a narrative background to the issues discussed. My second choice is of a documentary novel, where a court case forms the content. This book was chosen because the court case brings the attention to how "truth" can be negotiated when the victim of a murder was a most devalued citizen, a woman prostitute. The work of this author, in my opinion, deserves recognition because she devoted her time to documenting this woman's life and death so that these negotiations can be revealed.

8 The literal English translation of the title would be "Wandering at random", but in translations to other languages than English the book has been called "Augusta's house"; Augusta after the first woman described in the book.

9 English: Catrine and justice.

10 For a theoretical methodological discussion of this see, Kirsten, Grönlien Zetterqvist (Zetterqvist, 2002). See also Martha Nussbaum, (Nussbaum, 1990). However Nussbaum's main point of argument is that literature is the best way of expressing moral dilemmas.

11 English: April witch, 2002.

12 English: Rosario is dead, 2000.

consistently maintains solidarity with the most vulnerable, denigrated and exploited. In *Slumpvandring* Axelsson tells the life stories of three Swedish women in particular, all related to one another. The eldest is Augusta, born in 1895; then come Alice, born in 1940, and the youngest one, Angelica, born in 1984. Augusta's life, as well as those of the women related to her, mirror different situations of Swedish women in different phases of the twentieth century.

A crucial site for the stories so told is a house, Augusta's house, where the women come and visit, more or less openly, sometimes also in secret. The house becomes a kind of shelter for them – a place for withdrawal and reflection where they can meet, live together or in solitude, seek themselves and try to find roots. The house also has a “shelter within the shelter”, a small room up under the roof, where the women retreat with their pain and sorrow – for instance Alice during and after an “unwanted” pregnancy. In the room, the women seek to find healing from destructive and/or broken relationships with men.

Angelica, 17 years old, the youngest of these women, is very lonely and vulnerable. Being the last of Augusta's relatives, the young one, she could have been expected to look ahead and to carry the future. She does not. She has a number of destructive sexual relationships behind her, e.g. one with a married man, in wealthy circumstances and – later to be discovered – the father of one of her class-mates at school. The only way Angelica can find out of her situation seems to be to take her life. She chooses to do that and does so in Augusta's house.

What I have found interesting in relation to the small room, earlier mentioned, is that Axelsson has created a reference to a novel by another Swedish author, Ivar Lo-Johansson, one of the most recognized authors of the literary tradition of “worker authors”, authors coming from the working class. Axelsson's women find a book by Lo-Johansson from 1947 in the small room up under the roof. On the title page of the novel is a quote from one of the protagonists of the book stating: “We need to set our girls free”. Implied then is free for freer sexuality. However Axelsson's women, Alice and Angelica, who both in different times and ways have experienced this freer sexuality in relationships where they were exploited are each separately provoked by the quotation from the book. At the end of the book, Alice, after attending Angelica's funeral, finds the book anew and reflecting over her own life, critically expresses how her life could have taken a different route if she had seen with critical eyes how women were made objects for men. How they were not seen for their own value and so could not then see other women either.

Catrine – a young Swedish woman

The other book is based on an event which came to be a long and complicated Swedish court case. In early June, 1984 a young Swedish woman disappeared. Her name was Catrine da Costa. Her remains, except for her head, were gradually found, during the following months. She had been murdered, her body had been dissected, put in waste plastic bags, which were dispersed and then found in different places around the city of Stockholm during the same summer. When the body remains were examined, the pathologist interpreted the dissection of the body as having been done by persons with professional anatomical knowledge and skill. In his judgement, the deed also revealed sado-masochistic sexual leanings in the perpetrators. Following thorough investigations two medical practitioners became the main suspects, one of them being a pathologist (Sw.: obducent) and the other a general practitioner (Sw.: allmänläkare). The latter was brought to the attention of the police through the testimony of his young child, a daughter, who with the language of a small child seemed to be telling a story about having been present at the cutting up of the dead body of a woman.

The court proceedings were very long and complicated. The doctors denied any knowledge of the deed. The evidence against them was not strong enough to prove them guilty of murder, even though there was enough evidence against them to make extended court procedures possible. So, they were not found guilty of having murdered Catrine, but guilty of having cut her body up. The testimony of the child played an important role for this verdict together with other witnesses and informants. Consequently the suspects were fined for the minor crime of having desecrated a dead body. They also lost, but later regained, their licenses to practice medicine. They denied any knowledge of any crime throughout the proceedings.

In her book, Hanna Olsson reconstructs the life story of Catrine, a young woman who, due to tough circumstances, had become a prostitute. Olsson pieces Catrine's life together through interviews with her friends and family and by gathering relevant information. Through this, Olsson got to know and in her book describes the person behind the name and the terrible fate. She retells how Catrine was afraid of some of the men she had sex with; she feared their violence and weirdness. She was also loved by a mother and sister; she had her friends and dreamt of changes in her life. Olsson also convincingly shows how the media, the police and the court in their treatment of Catrine's case, show respect and give authority to men, educated men, "proper" Swedes, against a

woman, a prostitute and with a non-Swedish family name, which Catrine, by the way, had got through a brief marriage to a non-Swede.

Olsson goes through the whole material of this legal case, is present at the court proceedings and retells it all to her readers. In doing this she substantiates, as I see it, arguments for suspicions that gender, class and ethnicity definitely mattered in the proceedings around this court case. However, in writing her book Olsson also gives some of her dignity back to this young woman. Her life was brutally taken from her and was far too short. Through Olsson's book, also, Catrine's loved ones, who saw the memory of their dear one humiliated time and time again in the Swedish media and through words and acts in the court proceedings, might get some of their self-respect back.

How then are we to interpret these two stories? Acts of violence against women and exploitation of them sexually, among other things, seem to be there. They seem vulnerable and their rights to good lives are not respected. Are women not faring well in Swedish society? Are they being discriminated against? Does this happen even though equality in terms of political representation seems to have made great advances? What kind of a picture of equality between women and men do then Swedish statistics give?

Women and men in Sweden – facts and figures

The facts show a complex picture. For instance, regarding political representation, when women in 2002 held 45 % of the posts in government in May, in quite equal numbers to men, the administrative staff assisting and advising the members of government were to a great extent men. In 60 % of the cases, state secretaries were men and the percentage of top administrators in departmental work was as high as 72 %. (SCB, 2002, p 89).¹³

To understand the situation of women in Sweden one has to realize that in Scandinavia one crucial aspect of the situation of women is the high percentage of women enrolled in the labour force. This development in Sweden goes back to the 1960's, when women began to work outside the home in greater numbers.¹⁴ In connection with this, publicly run day-care centres for children were set up. Professional training schemes for women and men working in

13 "State secretaries", in Swedish: statssekreterare, "Top administrators", in Swedish: administrativa chefs-tjänstemän.

14 Studies of women's participation in the work force sometimes seem to forget the work of working-class women and single women, where being a housewife has not been an option.

these centres were developed.

In the year 2001, 79 % of Swedish women between 20–64 years of age were in the labour force, either employed, 76 %, or seeking employment, 3 %. The corresponding figure for men was 84 %, with 4 % out of the 84 percent who were seeking employment. However, the big statistical difference between women's and men's involvement in the labour force concerns whether they work fulltime or not. 51 % of the women in the labour force in 2001, worked fulltime compared to 74 % of the men. Of the women, 21 % work 20–34 hours a week, which only 5 % of the men do. (SCB, 2002, p 43). Given that they do not work fulltime, what do some of the Swedish women do the rest of the hours in a week?

Statistics show that women fill the greater part of that time with unpaid housework in their own homes. Men also to a limited extent spend some of their time weekly with such work, but much less than women do. Of the unpaid labour in homes women do two-thirds. The amount of time devoted to this unpaid housework varies from life situation to life situation. However no matter what the differences in life situations are, the facts point to an overall statistically significant difference between women and men: men have a few hours more of their time free every week, free from work, from unpaid house labour, free for leisure-time activities – compared to women. (SCB, 2002, p 34). One also has to point out the fact that women's unpaid house labour of course has a negative impact on the amount of their pensions, as the pensions system builds entirely on the work done within the paid labour sector.

Differences between Swedish women and men exist also in terms of their choices of working careers. Only 12 % of women and 12 % of the men find themselves in jobs where women and men are “equal” in numbers, i.e. where the ratios of women and men are between 40–60%. The two “equal” jobs, employing these 12 % of the labour force are accountancy and upper secondary school teaching in general subjects. Greater numbers of women are found in caring and nursing professions, as support staff in offices, as cleaners etc. Men are found in greater numbers in technical professions, in construction, computer-related professions, in marketing and business etc. (SCB, 2002, pp 56–57). However, even though “equal numbers” do not exist in most professions, a minority of men or women are to be found there. There are women in construction work, in IT-technology, working as engineers or entrepreneurs

etc, as well as there being men employed as pre-school teachers or nurses etc. However, in general, when salaries between women and men are compared, there is a clear discriminatory pattern coming to the fore – men have higher salaries.

When the ten most common professions of all in Swedish working life are compared, women in those professions have salaries ranging from 77–100 % of the salaries of men. 47 % percent of women and 31 % of men work within these ten professions. With one exception among these ten professions, women are discriminated against in terms of salary. The exception is the job of primary-school teacher where women and men have the same salaries. Only in this one of the ten professions do women and men have the same salary for the same job. The actual number of men working as primary school teachers is 21.000 and of women, 59.000. So the total number of women who have salaries equal to those of their male colleagues in the professions compared here, is 59.000 compared to those having less than their male colleagues, who number 756.000. (SCB, 2002, p 66).

When the statistics are structured so as to compare the ten most common women's jobs and the ten most common men's jobs the pattern is the same – women earn less money than men in almost all the twenty professions compared, with two exceptions: pre-primary teachers and cashiers and tellers. The number of men in these occupations is 8.000 (out of the total of 2.220.000 employed men in the labour force). When the figures are turned the other way around, it becomes clear that 64.000 pre-primary teachers are in a profession where the women, probably because of a higher average age than the men within this occupation, earn more than men, this being the only profession in the comparisons here where this is the case.¹⁵ Furthermore, 20.000 women working as cashiers and tellers have pay equal to that of men. (SCB, 2002, p 68–69). Of primary school teachers, as stated above, 59.000 are women who also have pay equal to that of their male colleagues. So out of a total of 2.030.300 women in the labour force when we look at the most common professions, as above, not many women have the same pay as their male colleagues.

When overall statistics are presented, they show that women in all sectors of working life receive in general eight percent less in salary than men. The

15 I have discussed this matter with staff at the SCB and they believe the difference is due to the fact that men entering these professions are younger than the women, so the age difference accounts for the difference in wages.

figures have then been cleared from differences pertaining to age, education, working hours and differences in working sectors and professions. These eight percent cannot be accounted for by anything other than gender. (SCB, 2002, p 72). So the conclusion that equal pay for equal work does **not** exist in Sweden although this has been a political issue since the 1960's is a well-founded one. Swedish women are exposed to economic discrimination. Women's work can definitely be said to be valued less.

Other figures regarding the working life of women and men in Sweden that can be chosen to complete this picture, regard the numbers of women on the boards of business companies. In 2002, women constituted 6 % of the board members in listed companies (SCB, 2002, p 93). In state-owned companies, 37 % of the board members in the year 2000, were women (SCB, 2002, p 91) and in academic life in 2000, 13 % of the professors with full chairs were women (SCB, 2002, p 33).

I would like to conclude this statistical review with some figures regarding crime. More than 15.000 women have reported cases of assault to the police in 2001, the perpetrator being a person they know. The number of cases where the perpetrator is unknown to the woman amounts to 6.000. Men are somewhat more prone than women to experience violence, but not from people they know. Most violence against men takes place out of doors, whereas violence against women takes place indoors in more than 80 % of the cases. Women fear violence against them: 25 % in younger age groups, or in older age groups, 40 % or more of the women express fear of violence. In 91 % of all the court cases, men are responsible for crime/violence against persons. In terms of sexual violence men are the perpetrators in 99 % of the cases. (SCB, 2002, pp 80–83. See also Lundgren, 2001 and 2002).

Harald Ofstad – a moral philosopher

So where does this take us? At first glance, Sweden, one of the Scandinavian countries, seems to have made a lot of progress in terms of equality between women and men. When the picture is exposed to closer scrutiny it seems more complex. Even though there are laws stipulating equality between the sexes, even though equality is a stated goal for governmental activities, for universities and schools, even though companies are forced by law to plan for equality within their businesses – a gap seems to exist, between an ought, what ought to be, and what presently applies in terms of salaries, sharing of paid and un-

paid work, professional and political influence and security in daily life and in personal and sexual relationships.

However, it also has to be clearly stated that Swedish women have gained authority and freedom during the last century, through political struggle, through education and in working life. In the present situation, however, it is as if the discrimination of Swedish women takes place in a space “in between”, in a space where it becomes invisible and seems to be difficult to handle. It seems to happen somewhere in between accepted laws and officially recognised policy. In describing the situation, one might say that “everybody” is for equality between the sexes: the laws are in favour of it, the policy of companies, governmental and other societal institutions, they all strive for it. And still, this unfairness towards women does exist, statistically documented and reflected in literature: women run the risk of being exposed to violence, of suffering injustice in personal and societal relationships.

According to Harald Ofstad, the moral philosopher already quoted, ethics is about taking seriously that which is serious: when animals and human beings suffer, are humiliated and do not fare well. Taking this seriously means getting involved, gathering knowledge and trying to act in such a way that the world may become less evil, according to Ofstad’s understanding of ethics and moral agency (Ofstad, 1982, p 10). Women do not fare well. Injury is done to them as women. How could this be understood, in order to improve their situation? Can the work of a moral philosopher like Ofstad maybe contribute to an understanding of this? And why choose him?

Why Ofstad?

One of my reasons for choosing Ofstad is that it might be interesting in this more international context to (re)introduce this thinker to a wider audience.¹⁶ Another reason is my own curiosity: could the work, a few decades old, of this male moral philosopher cast light on this present issue? Could his work have a bearing on gender issues that were not so clearly stated a few decades back? A third reason has to do with the word contempt in the title of his book *Our Contempt for Weakness. Nazi Norms and Values – And Our Own* (Ofstad, 1989). Women’s experiences of discrimination and the expectancy of being “there” for

16 Ofstad published in the 1950’s and 1960’s in English but later his writing appeared mainly in Norwegian and Swedish apart from *Our Contempt for Weakness. Nazi Norms and Values – And Our Own* (Ofstad, 1989).

men, shown here in the article, by statistics and the lives of women like Augusta, her relatives and Catrine, seem to imply a lesser value, or maybe rather an instrumental value ascribed to women. How come that their value is not equal to that of men? Can this perhaps be understood as being linked to contempt? If not, how could it then be understood? A fourth reason for choosing Ofstad is his definition of ethics, already introduced: that ethics is about taking the problem seriously when human beings and animals do not fare well.¹⁷ In some of his texts, he also uses the expression that they are oppressed. He does so in an interview in *Den nödvändiga olydnaden*¹⁸, by Maria Modig, (Modig, 1987, p 111–118). In texts I studied for my PhD thesis a few years ago oppression was a central concept and consequently I find it theoretically interesting when moral philosophers use that kind of terminology in investigating and theorizing ethics. Now the question is, how could a reading of Ofstad's work contribute to the understanding of the questions dealt with here?

Contempt for Weakness

Ofstad's *Our Contempt for Weakness. Nazi Norms and Values – And Our Own*, was first published in Norwegian in 1971, in 1972, in Swedish, with the title *Vårt förakt för svaghet. Nazismens normer och värderingar – och våra egna* (Ofstad, 1972). The English translation with the above title appeared in 1989 (Ofstad, 1989). In the study, Ofstad has analysed the “values, norms and interpretations of facts” of Nazi Germany. He describes and analyses the “‘Weltanschauung’ or ideology,” of Nazi Germany, “together with their identifications and psychological motivations”, which “formed those attitudes and conceptions of human beings which were the basis for their acts” (Ofstad, 1989, p 15). Ofstad states that his task is not one of offering causal explanations to the rise of Nazism in Germany, nor is he trying to psychologically understand those involved but what he is doing is to analyse the fundamental values and norms that guided the political movement (Ofstad, 1989, pp 15–17). Ofstad bases his analysis primarily on Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, and includes other texts only if they shed extra light on a particular issue or assist in characterizing a tendency (Ofstad, 1989, pp 17–18).

17 In this text I limit myself to discussing the value of human beings, well aware of the discussion going on concerning the value of animals and other living species.

18 Eng.: The necessary disobedience.

So Ofstad's purpose in *Our Contempt for Weakness. Nazi Norms and Values – And Our Own*, is to arrive at a characterization of Nazism and its followers. Through description and analysis of texts, Ofstad argues his way through the book. Central to his argument is that anti-Semitism was not the core of Nazism but “the doctrine that the ‘strong’ shall rule over the ‘weak’, and that the ‘weak’ are contemptible precisely because they are ‘weak’.” (Ofstad, 1989, p 5 and pp 165–214). This doctrine, Ofstad forcefully argues, did not disappear in 1945 but “expresses deeply rooted tendencies, which are constantly alive in and around us.” (Ofstad, 1989, p 5 and pp 212–214). He also expresses his findings in the following way: “We admire those who fight their way to the top, and are contemptuous of the loser.” (Ofstad, 1989, p 5).

In a later book, appearing in Swedish in 1987, *Vi kan ändra världen. Hur bör vi ställa frågorna?* (Eng.: We can change the world. How are we to phrase the questions?) Ofstad continues his ethical reflections and arguments (Ofstad, 1987). One can see lines from *Our Contempt for Weakness* as well as new questions that are discussed; among others: the use of nuclear weapons, the treatment of handicapped people, the right to refuse compulsory military service and others.

In both books, Ofstad describes, analyses and argues critically against ideas where thoughts are expressed, openly or indirectly, that the strongest are meant to rule, are meant to be more highly valued than other human beings, who are regarded as being weaker and who are to be despised precisely because they are, or rather, are described to be weaker. In addition to Nazism, in *Vi kan ändra världen* Ofstad chooses his examples from the world of science, like Social Darwinism, as well as from literature or philosophy.

“We and the others”

When Ofstad, in *Our Contempt for Weakness*, characterizes Nazism, he calls the tendency to admire those at the top, identification with power. This attitude is also linked with obedience exerted in a hierarchical system. This leads to a lack of responsibility, where the ideology identifies the enemy: those who are described as weak. Ofstad also discusses how a certain sentimentality, for instance about animals, replaces and represses actual feelings of guilt in the face of atrocities committed, one's own or those of others. His analysis leads him to a point where he shows how individual understandings of what is moral or not, is replaced by an ideology where a system of thinking characterized by nihilism and neglect

of humanity is what follows. Ofstad also makes clear that, within Nazism, a theory of hierarchy between what they called different races of human beings existed as part of the ideology. (Ofstad, 1989, pp 36–57, 126–148).

In one part of the book, Ofstad discusses how aggression and projection work as mechanisms within Nazism. Violence forms part of the ideology; the categorization of peoples into strong and weak goes along with black- and white thinking, where stereotypes are linked to the different groups of people. The division of human beings into two categories further allows for projection of what is bad onto other groups, i.e. the others. (Ofstad, 1989, pp 73–79).

In an earlier chapter, Ofstad describes the Nazi understanding of relationships between men and women. He then writes:

A man should be strong and ‘carry a sword’. He must have will power, physical courage, fighting ability, *Verantwortungsfreude* and *Entscheidungsfähigkeit*. He must be unsentimental and commanding. Women are emotional, stupid and subservient to men. They should be weak and poetical. (Ofstad, 1989, p 47)

Ofstad substantiates this statement by quoting from texts by Hitler. He draws the conclusion that the view prevailing within Nazi ideology is that “[w]omen are by nature passive, longing for the supporting force of the male”, (Ofstad, 1989, p 47). He further states:

A real man can never have any deep emotional contact with a woman. Her world is totally at odds with his. Real men can only have meaningful contact with other men, e.g. in such organizations as the SS. There they share the bonds of companionship and loyalty to their leader. (Ofstad, 1989, p 47)

Humanity and solidarity between human beings

In *Vi kan ändra världen. Hur bör vi ställa frågorna?* Ofstad has named one part of the book “Vi och de andra” (Eng.: We and the others). Another part has the title “Stark och svag” (Eng.: Strong and weak). In the chapters, Ofstad treats questions like: Are we discriminating against immigrants? Are handicapped people second-class human beings? Are we supposed to admire the one who succeeds? How socialist ought we to be? – and other questions. (Ofstad, 1987, pp 153–254).

Ofstad’s moral philosophy forms itself into a strong plea for humanity and solidarity among human beings. Basically, he holds that the lives of living creatures have a value in themselves. And as human beings we want to live our lives out to their full length, he argues. We do not want our lives to end too

early. That wish to live our lives is common to all and ought to be mutually respected by us as human beings vis-à-vis one another. At the same time, as human beings, we are vulnerable in our desire to live a good life, exposed, as we are to natural disasters and also to the evil of our fellow human beings. A basic respect for one another and our will to life, supported by a human capacity for empathic understanding for one another is crucial for Ofstad when he develops what solidarity means and how it is lived out. (Ofstad, 1987, pp 129–150).

However, in evaluating the moral behaviour or the perceived lack of it in another person's behaviour, Ofstad argues for the benefit of the doubt. When not knowing adequately the background of someone's acts one ought to grant them the benefit of the doubt, so as not to be condemnatory. In many situations, Ofstad argues, our capacity for acting differently may be limited so that we are not able to act differently than we do. It is not always so that we can be responsible for our acts, but on other occasions we can definitely be responsible for them. What Ofstad links with responsibility is whether when we acted, we knew what we did, knew the probable consequences of our actions and whether it was within our power to act in a better way. (Ofstad, 1987, pp 29–41). Ofstad also argues that we human beings should actively engage in the moral issues that are at stake, not fearing their subjective character, but recognizing it and exerting our responsibility. Admit uncertainty, involve our emotions and gather as much knowledge as we can. (Ofstad, 1987, pp 14–28).

Reflections on Ofstad's argument and observations

So where does the writing of Harald Ofstad take us? How does it shed light on the question of women still being subjected to discrimination in Sweden and for example, thought of as being "there" to meet men's needs in relationships, sexual and other, through work and in providing "home-services"? I would now like to point to a few issues in Ofstad's writings which I think address this problem.

Us and them

As I understand it, Ofstad has convincingly described how a group of people constructed themselves into an 'us' and constructed one or several other groups of people as 'them'. Such a division of human beings presupposes *a conceptual cleavage* upheld among human beings where certain characteristics are used to denote and then separate individuals. From such an assessment the status of individuals is defined as belonging to one or the other of the two (or more) groups.

I would like to argue here that ‘men’ and ‘women’ are concepts that can be used in constructing precisely such a conceptual cleavage. To talk, think and act in such a way as to uphold this particular division of human beings may contribute to upholding this same division and so contribute to repetitiously constructing an ‘us’ and a ‘them’. The use of gender as a category then constructs women and men as different groups. The crucial criterion, as I see it, for when such a use is constructive and when it is not, is whether the use contributes to the respect and equal value of all human beings, here, women and men.

Strength and weakness

Added to the conceptual construction of human beings in different groups, Ofstad also describes how human beings are ascribed characteristics, particularly ‘strength’ and ‘weakness’ according to which group they are described as belonging to. These characteristics, according to Ofstad, are not neutral in themselves but carry an implicit valorization. Being strong within this understanding of human realities is positive and valued as more valuable than being weak, which is regarded as negative.

Turning to the relationship between the sexes, we see that men have traditionally been described as strong and women as belonging to the “weaker sex”. An implicit valorization has followed also from this – men and their activities are then regarded as being of more importance, women and their activities of less. In the statistics on salaries discussed earlier, such a valorization of women’s and men’s work cannot other than be said to be reflected.

Violence

Ofstad’s analysis shows how violence is exerted against those who are described as being weak. Under the Nazi régime this violence was carried out to the point of extinction. Both the literary and the statistical data here referred to describe how men exert violence on women, even to the point where death follows.

Admiration of power – and neglect of humanity

Among the findings of Ofstad is also the tendency within the ‘us’ group to admire the power of the leaders and other members of the group. He also describes an identification with power. Ofstad interprets this as a tendency on the part of the individual to strengthen his/her identity by belonging to a strong ‘us’ group’. I would also like to point out that the reverse side of the same coin

is the contempt for those not described as belonging to the 'us' group because they do not share in the execution of power.

Ofstad also describes how an ideology of nihilism and neglect of humanity follows admiration of power, hierarchal power relations and acts of violence against those described as "the others". And I wish to pose the questions, rhetorically, whether the sado-masochistic murder of a young woman, or an older married man's sexual relationship with a teenage girl, a classmate of his child, can be described as respectful towards their humanity? Below I will discuss two aspects of a human rights culture, self-actualisation and self-determination and I regard respect for those aspects in relationships to be crucial to preserving the humanity of fellow human beings.

Men and women

Above a few quotations were given from Ofstad's texts, where he describes the understanding of the relationships between men and women found in Nazi ideology. Ofstad's analysis shows a construction of sex/gender where men are described as strong and women as weak. Other characteristics are also mentioned as part of the descriptions of each of the sexes. Following the valorization of strong and weak, this means that men and their activities are more highly valued, whereas women and what is connected with them is ascribed less value. As a consequence of this, women are to be subordinated. Ofstad's analysis also points to the opinion that men ought to socialize with other men rather than with women.

How to build a human rights culture?

The description of relationships between women and men made above in Ofstad's analysis of Nazi Germany I would definitely call a patriarchal understanding. What, however, may be somewhat confusing is that in the Swedish society, where equality between women and men has progressed, where political representation is advanced and where in policy making efforts are made towards equality, there still exist obvious patriarchal patterns reflected in the clear economic salary discrimination of women, in the unequal time women spend on unpaid house labour, compared to men, in men having more time a week free, as well as in the sexual abuse and violence directed against women. Patriarchal patterns and structures operate at the same time as those promoting equality between women and men. How can then a further change be brought about?

What does it take to build a thorough human rights culture, a culture where the rights of women are thoroughly respected?

Such questions might find their answer on a number of levels. When I deal with them below, I will basically keep to a more philosophical and theoretical level by suggesting certain basic conditions for such a culture, but I will also draw practical conclusions from my discussion. My position does not imply that I regard material conditions as not being of importance for the realization of human rights. On the contrary, I do regard economic issues, the cultural representation of gender patterns, the existence of forceful equality politics and policy to be of utmost importance. Of course, women ought to have exactly the same salary as men. Of course, women's pensions should not be lagging behind because they do more of the housework. Of course, women should be guaranteed safety in personal and sexual relationships etc. Here, however, I discuss certain underlying theoretical questions.

One humanity – no conceptual cleavage

When following Ofstad's analysis of Nazism we have seen how an 'us' and a 'them' were constructed. We could also see how this thought pattern structured the description and distribution of stereotyping characteristics to the two groups and how a valorization followed, and from that discrimination, brutality, violence and death.

The presupposition for this, as for gender discrimination in Sweden, is what I have already called a conceptual cleavage, the construction of humanity into two (or more groups), of 'us' and 'them'. When humanity, all human beings, are not regarded as one group, as a whole, but divided up into groups, where differences between human beings are used to separate, to describe, to denote, to (de)value, to assign to certain tasks and roles – then a process starts, a path is taken, away from an understanding of all human beings as equal. A process of what can be called an instrumentalization of the other is initiated.

As I interpret the ethics of Harald Ofstad, it has at its starting point an observation: we, human beings, want to live our lives to their full length. To make this possible we enter into a mutual agreement to respect this wish and not kill one another. For each one of us, one can conclude, life is dear; it has an intrinsic value, a value in itself. (Ofstad, 1987, pp 102–103). In this way, Ofstad formulates his humanist basis for his ethics, an agreement between human beings based on an interpretation of the conditions of human existence.

The African-American ethicist Katie Geneva Cannon, writing within a Christian feminist theological tradition, has written extensively on the conditions of African-American women. In her *Black Womanist¹⁹ Ethics* (Cannon, 1988), after having described how white people used certain norms for their relationships with white people and other norms for treating black people, behaviour that obviously was in conflict with their Christian faith, Cannon states that all human beings belong to *a common ethical field*, and so ought to be treated equally. (Cannon, 1988, p 165).

In *Our Contempt for Weakness* Ofstad points to how an ideology is formed in which nihilism and neglect of the humanity of others developed within Nazism. If the same is true for what happens when patriarchal understandings of relationships between men and women are at hand, then the ideology of patriarchy also has to be broken for a culture of the rights of all human beings, women included, to develop.

Self-actualisation and self-determination

In discussing justice and the good life in her *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Young, 1990)²⁰ the American feminist political philosopher, Iris Marion Young, states two values she regards as the two most general ones: 1. developing and exercising one's capacities and expressing one's own experience, 2. participating in determining one's actions and the conditions of one's actions.

Here, I would like to call the first of these values, self-actualisation and the second one, self-determination. I regard these two values formulated by Young to be of utmost importance when the questions are discussed of how the rights of individuals are to be respected. In her book, Young discusses the hindrances preventing these two values from being exercised, the hindrance to the first she calls oppression and to the second, domination. She describes how these hindrances take shape in political processes.

For my discussion here it is interesting to note that Young mentions exploitation as one of the five faces of oppression that she discusses. Exploitation hinders self-actualisation. In the societal process of labour, then, the benefits resulting from of the work of one group is transferred to another. (Young, 1990,

19 African-American feminists have chosen to call themselves womanists, in order to mark a certain distance to white feminists. The concept womanist comes from the writings of Alice Walker, as reprinted in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Womanist Prose, (Walker, 1983).

20 Parts of this book have been translated into Swedish and published together with other texts in the book, *Att kasta tjejkast*, (Young, 2000).

p 49). This has, as I see it, a bearing on our observations here: all the extra hours women spend per week on unpaid house labour; all the work women do in work place after work place with less pay than male colleagues – which group, as a group, benefits from this, if not men, economically as well as in terms of private comfort and pleasure?

Among the other faces of oppression that Young discusses are also powerlessness, marginalization, violence and cultural imperialism. (Young, 1990, pp 53–65.) Regarding the space needed for women to develop their capacities and express their own experience as well as self-determination I understand it to be of utmost importance for Swedish women to continue the processes of making public their problem issues: economic discrimination, violence and sexual abuse. Today there is also an extra challenge to be included in the understanding of “Swedish women”: the challenge of those women who have immigrated to Sweden in greater numbers since the 1960’s, to make sure that equality is granted them too. This is a most complex and recently debated issue which I cannot do justice to here; however, in line with the most of my argument above, I would suggest that these issues concerning women’s rights should also be approached as economic and social issues.

Women – as a political collective

The compilation of facts made at the start of this article concerning women’s political representation may, however, be misleading since it might be possible to draw the conclusion that, if women as a group gain political power, then it will be easy to focus on women’s issues and address them politically. Such a conclusion might reveal an essentialist understanding of women, taking for granted, that all women have the same political interests, think alike and value things alike – taking to an extreme such an idea may even ascribe to women common (psychological) characteristics. As women do not easily have common interests, think alike etc., this is a problematic understanding of women as a group, as a collective. How can then women as a political collective be understood?

In *Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective* Iris Marion Young discusses this question, (Young, 1997). With the help of Sartre’s concept series, she manages to find a way between the clear problems of essentialism and identity politics related to women and what may have seemed as a necessary dissolution of women as a political collective, namely if women’s identities were to differ too much. Using Sartre’s concept series, she develops an understanding

of women as an open and potentially political group, which, as a whole, or in parts, can be alerted and roused to political action given a particular historical situation. This however does not presuppose any particular common identity between women, nor essentialist understandings of what it means to be a woman. (Young, 1997, pp 12–37).

I find Young's argument interesting because it problematizes the presupposition that if women only achieve political power, meaning accurate political representation, "women-matters" will automatically be solved. Achieving changes in politics is more difficult than that. Forming a women-friendly society demands more as the facts here have shown. On the other hand, Young's conceptualisation still allows for the potentiality of women to form a political collective, on a particular issue, at a particular time.

Violence against women

One issue that cuts across the different economic classes and cultural backgrounds of Swedish women is the question of violence. The way violence against women is structured, as compared to violence directed towards men, clearly shows that Swedish women still live in a patriarchal culture. Women experience violence mainly from persons, i.e. **men** they know; in the majority of cases women are abused indoors, not outside and not in public arenas. We can compare this to men, for whom it is the other way around, as men run the risk of acts of violence against them in public and not from women but from other men, who in most cases are unknown to them.

From the point of view of a human rights culture, it is unacceptable that one part of a population violates the other, in this particular case the violence being based on intimacy, closeness exposed in personal relationships. Some may want to argue against this by stating that the violence is not so frequent, that a minor number of persons are involved etc. However, such arguments may miss the importance of the cultural aspects accompanying this. Masculinity (and thus male identity) is culturally expressed to a large extent as active, expansive and violent, in sexual and other relationships, in current media productions. I think it is fair to state that there exists a strong cultural backing for such behaviour by men. To change this, it would need to be strongly questioned and resisted publicly, and why not by men acting as a group? Until this is done, tacit acceptance remains the general attitude and these norms of masculinity must be said to have strong backing.

Critical studies

What is to be done then? I see a need for more and further critical studies. Above, I have mentioned culture as one area where patriarchal gender constructions prevail. I would also like to mention religion. Today religion is one of the ideological arenas where unequal ideologies and practices against women can find theoretical support and flourish. This is also true for ideologies other than religions where male-glorifying masculinities are found, Neo-Nazism being a crucial one, which ought to be mentioned. So, further critical studies in the fields of culture, religion and ideologies are needed.

Speaking of this, when Harald Ofstad published his *Vårt förakt för svaghet* the book was received with much hesitation, particularly his claim that Nazism as a political ideology could crop up again and that such an ideology was not a one-off event in human history. His claim was much debated and not believed, at the time. However he proved to be right. In Europe and Sweden Neo-Nazism has surfaced again.²¹ Having reflected over Ofstad's analysis of Nazism, undertaken in that field of human relations and here brought to this other field of human relationships, namely those between women and men, I would like to raise a related question.

Could one say that Ofstad's idea regarding what was at the core of Nazism, namely contempt for weakness, could be seen as being at the core of relationships between women and men, in this context also? Is it so that, at the core of a patriarchal view of men and women, there is a conviction that the one who is described as the stronger is meant to rule, that his power is to be admired, that he is to be respected to a larger extent, that more value is to be given to his person, his opinions and deeds, than to someone else, here women, who are meant to be regarded as weak, less valued for their persons as well as for their activities, and that they are, thus, meant to be subordinated and despised?

Is this at the bottom of the patriarchal ideology? If so, how can it be replaced by the thinking of a thorough human rights culture?

21 For studies of this development in Sweden see the works of Helene Lööw who after publishing her PhD thesis in 1990 (Lööw, 1990) has written a number of articles on this subject.

Directions for a thorough human rights culture

Above, I have argued that we should see humanity as one common humanity and not accept any conceptual cleavages so as to construct 'us's' and 'them's' but firmly hold on to our view of all humans as human beings equal in value and dignity and, like Ofstad, see the life of each and everyone as something to be respected. Such a position strives to give women equal respect. In addition to this, I have also argued that one cannot underestimate the difficulties women as a political collective face when entering the political arena, even when their numbers begin to approximate to those of men. Dealing with patriarchal power is not simply a question of statistics and numbers but is much more complex; it has, I would say, to do with long-lived mindsets, attitudes, emotions – complex constructs, which take a lot of power or energy to bring up to the surface, to challenge and change.

In bringing my article to a close, I also want to bring to our conscious attention what feminist ethicists have pointed to for a long time, namely the damage that patriarchal power does to women's bodies, an underlying theme present also in this article. One of the early voices was the Christian social ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison, who in her *Our Rights to Chose* (Harrison, 1983), in the USA of the early 1980's, argued for women's self-actualisation and self-determination when dealing with reproductive issues. Further in her *Making the Connections. Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, she argues that a more body-affirming ethical code should be developed (Harrison, 1985). Her work is one among many others (see also Mananzan, Oduyoye, et al, 1996). A recent development of this kind of Swedish feminist thinking is a PhD-thesis with the title *Att vara kroppsobjekt* (Eng. Being a Body Subject), (Grönlien Zetterqvist, 2002), pointing in a direction where mind and body are not held apart but brought together. In the field of theories of knowledge, attention has been brought to the bodiliness of knowledge by theorists such as Donna Haraway and Lorraine Code.

A human rights culture would need, as I argue along with many other feminist ethicists, to take the bodily well being of women as a crucial criterion, this to counteract what the deprecation of women does, economically, socially and consequently also to their (our) bodies. Not only women, however, but also children and men may also experience that their value is regarded as less. So to conclude, the bodily well being of human beings as well as the mutual respect for the self-actualisation and self-determination of each and everyone is crucial for a human rights culture.

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