Promoting changes in existing social attitudes to women and sexuality

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Male dominated societies have reacted in at least two very different ways to the perceived threat of women's sexuality – by desexualizing or segregating them. An equally important dividing line is between cultures of shame and cultures of guilt.
In 2002 a seminar on promoting gender equality to combat trafficking in women and children was arranged by UNIFEM, with support from UN ESCAP and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and held at the United Nations premises in Bangkok. An earlier version of this essay was presented as a plenary strategy paper.

The paper takes as its point of departure that sexuality and gender as we know them are social constructs, and that social constructs means culturally dependent, i.e. varying between cultures. It is also pointed out that there are marked differences in power between countries, regions and individuals, and that within each country, region and subculture there is also a difference in power between men and women.

Such differences are illustrated on a very broad level by comparing how different groups of cultures attempt to control female sexuality. A more specific and partly different example is given by looking into the very specific historic circumstances surrounding the development of a relative gender equality in the Nordic countries. The paper concludes by urging that future work be based on the specific circumstances of each culture and that one has to look into how not only sexuality but women themselves become commodities for a market. Finally it is pointed out that when planning for interventions we must make clear whether we are dealing with a culture of shame or one of guilt.

Definitions

When wishing, for whatever reason, to change how people perceive reality and how they behave it is only far too easy to be seduced by our own wishful thinking. Our wishes are, however, not going to change reality; not even our brilliant analysis will in itself change reality. Nevertheless change is possible once we realise that what is crucial is not the nobleness of our aims, but rather our ability to identify possible leverages of change.

Such leverages are dependent on the specific cultural setting. When we – as in the title of this presentation – talk about social attitudes' we must realise that they are *social*, i.e. determined in a social process and thus the result of a process that is shaped by a specific culture (or even sub-culture). That all known societies have been dominated by males, does not mean that such dominance has been achieved by the same means or have resulted in even comparable cultural constructs. As we all know there are vast differences between societies and cultures in how differences between men and women are perceived (i.e. socially constructed). This is in itself evidence of the fact that differences between the sexes are by no means fixed or given by nature or some deity. Our perceptions and preconceptions of women (and men), of sexuality and of women *and* sexuality are social constructs. Once realising that, we will be forced to accept that there is no one way to change these social constructs, but rather that any change has to be culture specific. Ready made solutions' cannot be exported.

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

At the bottom lies of course an unequal distribution between nations, regions, sub-cultures and individuals of wealth and power. Within each nation, region and sub-culture there is also an unequal distribution of wealth and power between men and women. If we wish to change existing attitudes to women and sexuality we must not forget that we are dealing with the unequal distribution of wealth and power. We must also not forget that this unequal distribution of wealth and power is the result of culture specific processes and beliefs.

Women and the (male) social order

Social reality is created by the interaction of human beings. Our interactions do not take place in a void but are shaped by the same social order we are re-creating and possibly modifying through these actions that, as initially noted, are shaped by the social order we are creating by these actions. Let us, however, try to be more specific and relate what has been said to more specific geographical, historical and social contexts. In this paper I will discuss the consequences of specific historical conditions that have been of importance for shaping the gender relations in some of the Nordic countries and how such specific circumstances can make gender relations very different. The purpose of the discussion is to demonstrate that we cannot escape our historical background, but must build on it. Our Nordic patterns cannot be exported, but the lessons may be learned and comparable patterns sought in other cultures. What I wish to illustrate is a method to search for solutions, not to propose a solution in itself, because solutions – or roads to change – have to be culture specific.

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

But men do not have the children. Men may be the fathers of the next generation of rulers, but men do not give birth to other men. This is the weak link of patriarchy. Men are, in spite of universally being of the ruling gender, dependent on women to have heirs; And women can be certain about who is their child and who is not, but men cannot be *certain* about who is the father of the children of their spouse.

[1] Id=”fagessay-lewin-33”> This does, of course, not rule out that (many) individual men are subjected to the power of individual women. What is meant is that men as a collective have resources that subjugate women as a collective, and that all known societies are arranged for males dominating females (on a collective level) so that although ruling queens, female prime ministers, wealthy women actively leading large corporations etc are known to exist and provisions made for females taking such roles, such provisions are for the exceptions.

Men are thus dependent on women and their fecundity – thus sexuality becomes not only an issue for the spouses in the individual partnership but becomes also an issue of great significance for society at large. The fecundity of women, and ultimately the sexuality of women hence has to be controlled since this really is the weak spot of patriarchy: Who is the real father of the alleged son and nephew? Because we cannot have wealth and privileges passing to the wrong male child, since that would be totally against the orderly, organised and foreseeable transferral of wealth, power and privileges that to a large extent is what constitutes society! The sexuality of women, thus constitutes a threat to male supremacy and the existing social order. That the concepts of women and sexuality constitutes an issue worth discussing in a paper like this indicates in itself that they in some way are perceived as special. What has been presented above is an attempt to explain what makes these concepts an issue, and indeed a crucial issue.

Protecting the social order

Accepting – at least for the sake of the argument – the above background we find that societies have reacted in at least two very different ways to handle the threat of women's sexuality. And that there are different and deeply culture specific, perhaps even what could be called different culture constituting, ways of understanding, explaining and socially create women and sexuality is what is the point of this presentation: We must examine the specifics of each culture and its roots to be able to facilitate change.

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

On the other hand, societies may accept that women as men *are* sexual. If denial of female sexuality is not chosen, then women's sexuality has to be controlled physically. This is done through segregation so that men and women outside of the family meet only under very restricting circumstances. Given that society is controlled and dominated by men, the restrictions necessary to control sexuality of course mainly limit and restrict the freedom and possibilities of women, so that their sexuality does not bring havoc to the orderly society created by men. This strategy is common among Muslim societies, where it of course falls on the fathers, brothers and husbands to help uphold the order of society and to control the threatening sexuality of what is perceived as their women.

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

Furthermore these two cultural strategies illustrate very clearly that counterstrategies used to promote the situation of women and to change attitudes to women and sexuality must be culture specific. What may work in an occidental Christian or post-Christian culture is obviously not the counterstrategy that would be relevant in a Muslim culture where the question whether women are sexual or not is not an issue, but rather the fact that they are seen as sexual is the issue!

Social conditions that may lead to different outcomes

The world does, however, not consist of two huge cultures, but of an almost infinite number of specific cultures and sub-cultures, and the more specific we get the greater the chance to find mechanisms that can be utilised for changing attitudes to women and sexuality in a certain culture, although the same mechanisms may not be available in other cultures.

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

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

Why then is it so? The answer, it is claimed, has to be sought for in the roots of the Western culture. Roots that one finds on the one hand in ancient Greece, a collection of city states all characterised by inequality and an unequal distribution of wealth. Democracy was not for women and slaves. Other roots are to be found in Rome, an empire built on a slave economy and on an amassment of incredible wealth, wealth and power that had to be orderly transferred to the next generation of males. After the fall of the Roman empire, Western culture was characterised by feudalism, i.e. once more emphasising the extremely unequal distribution of wealth and an amassment of wealth, power and privileges at the top of the feudal pyramid. A Church just as feudal and also intent on amassing wealth supplied an ideological system supporting this societal construct where the sexuality of women definitely was seen as a possible threat to the existing social order. Sexual women were if not fornicating with, at least in contact with the devil. The sexuality of women could definitely be used against women to control them socially.

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

With the partial exception of Denmark that was denser populated, blessed with better soil and actually producing a surplus (and to which the arguments in this article only partly applies since Denmark not only is part of the European continent but in many ways also culturally closer to continental Europe) there was not any surplus expropriated by a ruling feudal class, simply because

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[2] Id="fagessay-lewin-49"> It should immediately be made clear that the previous statement that all societies are dominated by males apply also to the Nordic societies. It is not claimed that gender equality exists in Scandinavia or in the Nordic countries. What is claimed is that the accepted male gender role is slightly less aggressive and – what is more important in this context – that sexual double standards are less pronounced than in many other countries, and that equality between the sexes is in some ways less controversial than in other societies within the Occidental culture.

there was not enough surplus produced to supply a proper feudal society! Thus there was also a more equal distribution of wealth – or rather of poverty.

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

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

Even in semi-modern and modern times Swedish society has, when having been subjected to major changes, reverted to these old pre-Christian patterns. When Sweden was industrialised (which happened very late) during the last decades of the 19th century and the rapid modernisation created great uncertainty, unmarried cohabitation became common once more among Swedes living in the new agglomerations that grew rapidly as part of industrialisation. In the breakdown of norms, people reverted to ancient patterns.

On this note, a last example. When Sweden during the 1960es left the last traces of its rural past behind and the economy went through an immense industrial restructuring, unmarried cohabitation once more became common. Between 1966 and 1972 the marriage rate in Sweden dropped with 40 percent, and at that time the future of the nuclear family was believed by some to be threatened. But unlike in many other countries of the West, unmarried cohabitation in Sweden was not deviant and not as in other countries primarily a phenomenon among radical students. The enormous drop in the marriage rate clearly indicate that it was not only small groups in opposition to society that opted for unmarried cohabitation. On the contrary most people', i.e. ordinary people, just stopped marrying and set up consensual unions without the blessing of the Church or the state simply because during these transitional times such conventional behaviour as marrying was not seen as necessary. But the traditional Nordic values of partnership were still – or perhaps even more – emphasised: Acceptance of sexuality in adolescence and outside marriage, but an emphasis on companionship and fidelity for both spouses in marriage. And this is in several ways different from the mainstream of the contemporary Western industrialised culture.

Indicators of this deviance of Sweden[3] can be found in various areas of life related to sexuality and the relations between the sexes. For instance: Sex education in schools was made compulsory in

[3] Id="fagessay-lewin-61"> We have previously been talking about the Nordic countries, the Nordic culture and of Scandinavia simply because the modern nation states did not exist in the modern sense 2000 years ago. When we now talk about modern times and contemporary legislation we have to be more specific. Sweden is the most clear-cut example among the Nordic countries. Finland was for 500 years part of Sweden and most of what is said applies also to Finland, although modern legislation of course is different since Finland from 1809 until independence in 1917 was part of the Russian empire. For Norway, which gained independence from Sweden in 1905 (after having been part of Denmark until 1814) much of what is said applies. For Denmark, which is the only of the Nordic countries with a true feudal history some apply and some don't. In particular prostitution has

the 1950es; the schools are according to legislation to promote the right to individual choices when it comes to sexual life styles, and is also by law to promote the equal rights of men and women and to promote gender equality and work against double standards; female labour force participation was higher in Sweden at an earlier date than in other European countries; parental leave (note, not maternal leave) is a right and part of the leave is automatically assigned to the father; since the 1970es there is only one ground for divorce, namely that at least one of the partners does not wish to continue the marriage; for the last 30 years adolescent clinics have supplied teenagers with contraceptives and prescriptions. And as has already been noted, female virginity was – compared to most Western countries – never much of an issue.

The point is not that this should be unique to Sweden, because it is not, but rather that these reforms' often were not reforms but rather enactments of deep-rooted cultural traits and therefore accepted more easily and/or earlier than in other countries.

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

In Anglo-Saxon parlance one may well speak about (and actually until only a decade or so ago *only* spoke about) pre-marital sexuality. In Sweden we spoke about adolescent sexuality. The subject matter was the same: The sexual behaviour of young people. But in the Anglo-Saxon cultural setting the fact that it did take place outside of marriage defined it. When (or if) people of the Anglo-Saxon variety of the Western culture abandon talking about pre-marital sexuality and instead start talking about adolescent sexuality their perception of sexuality of young people will have changed. Their preconception will be different, and the social construction of the sexuality of young people will be different.

Furthermore, in the American variety of the English language one may speak about sexually having gone all the way', by which is meant having had intercourse with penis in the vagina. The lesser importance of virginity and the related lesser concern about coitus in the Swedish (or Nordic) culture may well be illustrated by this phrase. Behind the phrase lies an idea of sexual experiences being acquired in a culturally prescribed stepwise manner, one step at a time beginning with hugging with clothes, passing over kissing, caressing with clothes and (in the American context) continued caressing without clothes including manual and oral stimulation possibly to orgasm in order to finally reach the last step of the stairs: The full intercourse with penis in the vagina. In the Nordic countries this is not so. Genital intercourse comes much earlier in the accumulation of sexual experiences, whereas manual and particularly oral stimulation to orgasm comes after genital intercourse. In the American context going all the way, i.e. having genital intercourse with penis in the vagina, is thus a *confirmation* of a relation, whereas among young people in Sweden genital intercourse is an *initiation* to a possible relation.

Different is not morally superior

As must be obvious by now Swedish (or Nordic) relative equality between the sexes as well as a more accepting attitude to nevertheless subjugated groups such as adolescents and women having sexual experience is by no means the result of moral superiority, but simply effects of an almost equally shared poverty that made women more of partners and companions than threats to the male order. The extremely low population density also made the fecundity of women more of a blessing than a

- which is in line with the argument presented – been much more accepted in Denmark than in the other Nordic countries.

threat. A lesson that people from the Nordic countries very often have to learn in this context is that we are the deviants – not the rest of the world. The world is not going to eventually catch up with us and be like us. We are not the norm. This does, however, not mean that lessons can not be learned from our (admittedly very specific) history.

So has, for instance, prostitution traditionally been considerably less prominent in the Nordic countries (with the exception of Denmark as already noted in a footnote) than in other countries of the industrialised West. According to the perspective offered in this paper this is of course a result of the comparative equality between the sexes, the relative acceptance of women's sexuality and the related emphasis on companionship. Factors that according to the analysis have their roots in the historical equality of poverty and not in any moral superiority.

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

Two to three decades ago it would have been fair to say that there really was not much of a prostitution problem *per se* in Sweden, but rather an outgrowth into prostitution of a huge drug problem where some of the women attempted prostitution as an alternative to theft and robbery to finance their use of illicit drugs. Today prostitution is partly of a different type. It is still far from as common, and definitely not as accepted, as in most countries of the West. It has, however, gone through some very profound and ill-boding changes related to increased affluence. Trafficking in women – with Sweden as a receiving country – as well as sex tourism from Sweden to countries in Eastern Europe and the Far East have become important aspects of prostitution. These changes are entirely dependent on Sweden being an affluent society and individual males being able to pay for sexual services and pay enough to make trafficking profitable and/or pay enough to be able to travel abroad with the intention of procuring sexual services.

This development is in line with the arguments put forth in this paper since it appears that affluence has made it easier to view individual women not as possible partners and companions but primarily as suppliers of sexual services. The prostitution that has been increasing is that related to the relatively more costly trafficking and sex tourism rather than the less costly drug related locally supplied.

Building on what there is

To borrow a quote from an old American TV commercial: «But where is the beef?!». So where is the proposed strategy? The proposed strategy is in the preceding analysis and discussion.

This can be itemised as follows (and will shortly be slightly elaborated):

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

2) Sexuality may be nature-given, but there is no natural sexuality. The sexuality we are confronted with, sexuality as we meet it, perceives it and act it is socially constructed.

3) Similarly, there are biological differences between women and men but the differences we perceive between actual males and females are not given by nature but created by the social context.

4) When we say that gender roles and sexual scripts are socially constructed we must realise that what we are saying implies that ready made solutions most often cannot be exported. Interventions have to be truly culture specific.

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

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

What we have to study is then what is usually called socialisation, i.e. how we in a social process are formed by (our) society at the same time as we through our participation in this process also are active in shaping society. Society may appear reified, but as we all know, change is possible. In times of rapid external changes traditional values and mores will face breakdown, because the old ways no longer appear feasible or even possible. Also in areas not directly related to the induced societal transformation traditional norms will be questioned and weakened. What sociologists call an anomic state will persist with an attitude of anything goes', but not for ever and perhaps not even for long. Lack of norms is mentally exhausting, having to decide all the time and again what to do, how to do it and where the limits are. People will find norms, and when building these new norms they will build on old ones. If the most recent appear non-working there will be a strong tendency to revert to even older ones – to the roots of the particular society. This is our window of opportunity.

Windows of opportunity – Finding the temporally relevant cultural trait

The strategy proposed is then to analyse the particular social contexts attempting not only to be descriptive but with an aim of understanding how cultures and sub-cultures have been formed so that we may find exactly those areas where women and men are seen as companions, to find those areas where people are people and not commodities, and to find those areas of these particular cultures and subcultures where the sexuality of women is not perceived as threatening.

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

Finally, a last word of caution. This paper has as its point of departure taken a rather lengthy example. The reason of course being that such an illustration may make clear how to proceed and may illustrate what may be found also when dealing with very different cultures. It was initially pointed out that male dominated societies have reacted in at least two very different ways to the perceived threat of women's sexuality. On the one hand one could attempt to desexualise women, and on the other hand it could be accepted that women just as men are sexual but the perceived threat was met by segregating women so that their sexuality would not hinder or disturb men in their oh so important societal tasks.

Another, in this context, equally important dividing line between cultures is related to whether I live in a culture of shame or one of guilt.

Is what matters whether others know that I did it *or* that I actually did it (irrespective of what the others know)? Is it losing face or my own belief in myself that matters most? Do I live in the context of

an other directed ethics or in the context of an inner directed ethics? Am I most susceptible to shame or to guilt?

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

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