

# Contextualising Conferences

## Ten Reflections on Ten Years of Swedish Local Authority Events on “Masculinity in Change”

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When reflecting on the ten-year long series of one-day conferences that this special issue centres around, *Maskulinitet i förändring* [Masculinity in change] organised by Länsstyrelsen i Örebro län [county], beginning in 2010, I kept coming back to several questions: is this a unique phenomenon and achievement? How do we explain it? What are we to make of it? In this article, I go through ten reflections responding to, if not answering, these questions.

### 1. What context? What background?

The first thing that struck me was the question of the background to this, possibly unique, series of conferences. Such events do not happen from nowhere and in isolation; they do not fall from the sky but arise from what has happened and been done before (see Axelsson & Wetterberg, this issue; Wetterberg, this issue). They occur within the wider context of gender relations, politics and policy, both locally and societally. So, how is this series even possible? There are several ways of approaching this.

The relations of men, masculinities, feminism, gender equality and change have a long history. The man/men question is well-documented in feminist and critical gender theory and practice (Hanmer, 1990). Feminism has always included an explicit or implicit critique of masculinity or “manliness” (Lilieqvist, 1999). While there is much resistance by men to feminism, there is the relatively little-known history of some men’s support for First Wave Feminism (Strauss, 1983) – so this is not new.

One way of understanding the background to the Örebro conference series is in terms of the support among some men for the aims of feminism and the Women’s Movement, in the wake of Second Wave Feminism. This led on in the 1960s and 1970s to the formation of a very uneven development of the “Men’s movement”, meaning the anti-sexist men’s movement, not the later mythopo-

etic and anti-feminist men's movements (Hearn, 1993). However, even with the established and widespread commitment to gender equality in Sweden, the story of the place of men is not so straightforward. For a start, in this, a distinction needs to be made between the involvement of men, as *subjects*, as individual and collective agents, in work around gender and gender equality, and interventions on men, masculinities and boys as *objects* of change, by anybody or anyone regardless of gender.

In Sweden, an important step opening up debate was the intervention by the then young academic, Eva Moberg, in her 1961 article, provocatively entitled "Women's conditional release". This critiqued the dominant framework of the Swedish Women's Movement, as only "conditional release" by way of "women's two roles": that women should be encouraged to develop: one role as mother, the other as worker. In this, women were encouraged to work out of the house, as long as maintained responsibility for home and children. Instead, Moberg argued for dual roles for both women and men, to change the gender order substantially, with women's entrance to public life paralleled by reciprocal entry of men into the private (Franklin, 2010: 98–100). As Holth and Mellström (2010: 16) put it,

*Men had to take a reproductive responsibility and women had to enter the labor market to a much higher degree than in the 1950's and 1960's. The general political vision and belief was, and still is, that male emancipation is to be achieved through men's active fatherhood. Fatherhood became a most important project of the gender equality politics of Swedish state feminism. This is what Klinth (2002) calls daddy politics.*

Moberg also suggested a new term for gender equality – *jämställdhet* – and thus the "double emancipation" for both men and women as the long-term political vision, even if this since been critiqued as (hetero)normative. Other key interventions on men from this period included: the groundbreaking book, *Kvinnors liv och arbete* (Dahlström, 1962), in which issues of men and masculinity were discussed at length; and Rita Liljeström's (1968) research on the dangers of the male role, including connections between lack of active fatherhood and self-destructive/destructive behaviour. These developments were followed in the 1970s by the government-funded research programme on masculinity and fatherhood (Jalmert, 1979, 1984), coining the expression "in principle men" for men who tend to agree with the idea of gender equality but do not always live in accord with them.

Another important government-funded report was that by Margot Bengtsson and Jonas Frykman (1987), *Om maskulinitet: Mannen som forskningsobjekt*. They critiqued earlier Swedish research for its more static, consensus-oriented, dualistic approach to masculinity and gender relations. They engaged much more

with international scholarship on masculinities, men's practices, hegemony and legitimization of men's dominant positions (Nordberg, 2000). Instead, they promoted a more dynamic framework with masculinity as a social construct, shaped by power relations intersected by class, ethnicity, and sexuality structures.

Many further developments have occurred since in Sweden in policy development, research and academia. Many topics have been addressed, including boyhood, education (see Heikkilä, this issue), fatherhood (see Axelsson, this issue), men in non-traditional occupations, men in organizations, management, business, and homosociality and obstacles to women entering men's occupations. University research groups, teaching and doctoral studies have been established, and much greater concern has been directed to intersectionality, violence, racialisation, migration, sexuality, age, marginalisation, gender identity, as well as multiple theoretical questions and perspectives (see Gottzén & Jonsson, 2012; Hearn et al., 2012).

Alongside these developments are numerous policy, political, and activist interventions in Sweden, from different perspectives, for example: the work of the activist group MÄN (earlier Män för jämställdhet); the governmental inquiries, SOU *Män för jämställdhet* (2014), and SOU *Transpersoner i Sverige* (2017); and the work of RFSL in sexual/gender identity politics, and RFSU in sex education. All of this and much more are part of the background to the Örebro conferences.

## 2. What are conferences?

As mentioned, I have never previously come across anything similar to this series of ten conferences with this particular focus on 'masculinity'; but there again few things are totally unique, when you look across the world. And, of course, in another sense, there are thousands of gatherings that are all about masculinity, but not recognised as such; that is called 'business as usual'. But I assume the difference here is that these conferences are framed more or less within gender equality discourse and with a critical edge and orientation – even if what that means is not agreed.

Having said this, it is important to be clear that are not just any kind of meeting – these events are conferences of a certain kind. Conferences are akin to mini-societies, mini-cultures, and may range from the blatantly brutal and authoritarian, to community-building to gentle love-ins. They also have a certain structure, with organisers and contact points, key speakers, sometimes panels, and they have audiences, what might be thought of as a constituency or a community. People want to come to them or else they would stop. Conferences are fascinating happenings, with meaning and identity.

All ten events have been framed under the banner of 'Masculinity in change'. The series appears very well organised and pre-planned, perhaps more as infor-

mation sessions, rather than intensive small group discussions, as in some conferences. Also, as with other conferences, the series acts as an important reference point, marking knowledge-gathering, commitment, and perhaps continuity and consensus. Their impact and memory of their impact can spread far and wide.

### 3. The local state, the state, and the suprastate: why the län?

The next reflection concerns locating the conferences within the broader structure of governance. Most of the organised, state and governmental interventions and initiatives of this kind that I know of have been by national or supranational governmental authorities. At the national level, the longest running intervention in this area I know of is the Men's Section of the Finnish Council for Gender Equality (officially Subcommittee on Men's Issues, open to all genders), operating since 1988, and originating from a Men's research group from 1986. This Subcommittee can be understood as developed within the context of state feminism.

More usual have been supranational events and projects, including Nordic Council of Ministers Men and Gender Equality programme 1995-2000; EU FP 4 European Profeminist Men's Network; EU FP 5 Social Problem and Societal Problematisation of Men (CROME); EU FP 6 Coordination Action on Human Rights Violation (CAHRV); EU EIGE Involvement of Men in Gender Equality from 2011; EU *Study on the Role of Men in Gender Equality* 2013; and so on.

So, while there are many examples of events on men and gender equality at the national and supranational levels, it is very hard to imagine this ten-year conference series being organised at the level of local government in most countries. Perhaps the county's (län) organising of the conference series can be explained by both the embedded pervasiveness of state feminism in Swedish public authorities, with their organising of other equality activities, and their relative autonomy below the national governmental level, as demonstrated in the relative decentralisation of decision-making during the COVID-19 crisis.

### 4. Why Örebro?

An intriguing question is: why Örebro? Örebro is not Stockholm; it is a medium sized city, centrally placed in the southern middle of Sweden. I am reminded how in the UK certain non-metropolitan cities, for example, Bradford, Bristol, Leeds, Sheffield, have figured relatively strongly in activism around men and feminism. Perhaps 'more important' issues dominate within capital cities. Also, Örebro University Women's Studies and Gender Studies celebrated its 40 years' anniversary of teaching and research in October 2018, and at least some of those involved in the conference series have passed through those courses. Inte-

restingly, my own first visit to Örebro was talking at the EU Swedish Presidency conference, 'Men and Equality', 2001, and walking (the first and only time in my life) through an anti-EU picket at the Örebro Castle venue.

## 5. Which framing? Which words?

In framing all these conferences, there are two very headline words in the conference announcements. The headline used for all the events is *Maskulinitet i förändring*. First, *maskulinitet* [masculinity] is used in the singular rather than the more usual plural, as has become more usual in academia and much policy development over the last 30 years. The preference for the use of 'masculinity' rather than 'men' or 'boys' (as used in the first announcement), is also interesting. There are well-rehearsed arguments on both sides here. Briefly: some commentators see prioritising attention to masculinity/ies as a more open-ended approach; others see making masculinity the prime concern a way of avoiding men's power position, of letting men 'off the hook' from critique (Hearn, 2004).

The other key word in the headline is *förändring* [change]. What is interesting here is the use of change, which can mean many things, and can even be retrogressive, in preference to *jämställdhet*, equality, gender justice or feminism. In both these cases, the organisers have opted for the less threatening words that can be interpreted more variably and in the eye of the beholder.

## 6. Which political and policy orientations?

Linked closely to the comment above on the conference headline, there is the question of the conferences' political and policy orientations. Importantly, focusing on men and masculinity is, in itself, no guarantee of criticality or support for feminism and gender equality. There are masses of men's actions and activisms, in mainstream politics, business, social movements, and so on, that are unnamed as such, and not gender-conscious (Egeberg Holmgren & Hearn, 2009). The various motivations for men to be interested in sexual/gender politics, and by implication political positionings of interventions, by all, into 'masculinity in change', have been summarised by Michael Messner (1997) through three distinct, sometimes overlapping, motivations: 'stopping men's privileges'; 'highlighting men's differences'; 'prioritising the costs of masculinity' (Fig. 1). Each of these can lead onto specific different politics; 'the costs of masculinity', taken alone out of context, can re-centre men, prioritising men's interests within men's rights approaches. The danger of re-centring, though reduced from the other two apexes, is still present in shifting from initial attempts to move and change men.

However, even amongst more progressive tendencies, at the top of the triangle, there are significant differences. Although most there would agree on the

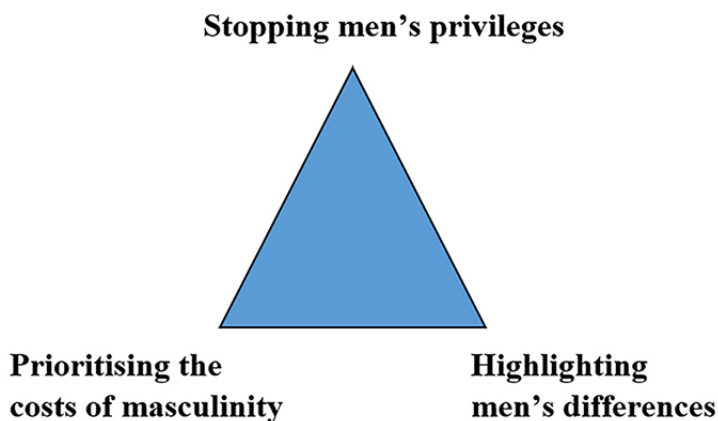


Fig. 1. Messner's (1997) triangle of men's motivations for involvement

centrality of social justice, and stopping of men's privileges (Fig. 2), what actually or exactly should be the positive political programme beyond that is much less agreed upon. To understand differences within that social justice position needs further refinements. Here the work of Lorber (2005) is helpful, in distinguishing three broad feminist, and thus profeminist, positions: reform feminism, resistance feminism, rebellion feminism. Each can be characterised by how they direct their critique, with different implications for men and masculinities:

- gender reform feminism: critique/against/abolish gender imbalance;
- gender resistance feminism: critique/against/abolish patriarchy;
- gender rebellion feminism: critique/against/abolish gender categories.

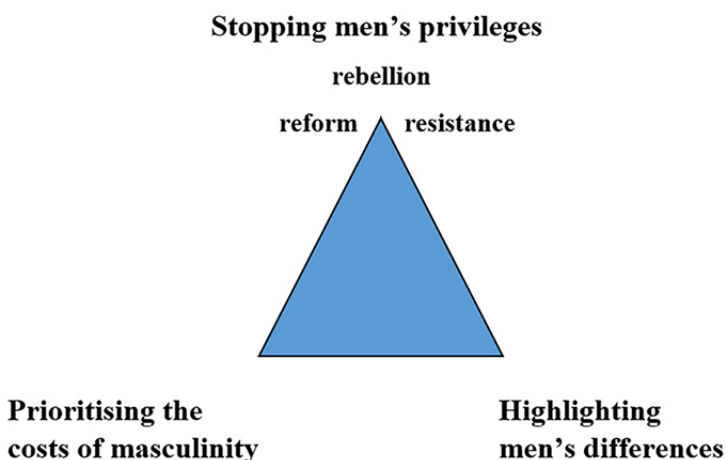


Fig. 2. Lorber's distinctions in relation to Messner's (1997) triangle

This framework highlights some tensions in the relations of men and masculinities to different notions of ‘gender equality’, with their varying tendencies to solidify or subvert current formations, different degrees of radicalness (Johansson & Lilja, 2013), and different perspectives on dissociation and distancing from ‘other men’ and patriarchy (Burrell, 2019).

In these ten conferences, the emphasis seems to have been on a combination of: highlighting men’s differences; prioritising the costs of masculinity; and on stopping men’s privileges to within a loosely gender reformist agenda, rather than overthrowing patriarchy or abolishing gender categories. Of course, individual speakers may well have raised some different prospects in their presentations.

## 7. Who speaks?

So, onto the matter of who speaks. I have spoken at one of the conferences myself, but my direct knowledge of most of them is limited to the ten two-page conference announcements. Even from a quick glance, I could see some patterns in who has been invited to speak or at least who had accepted to speak – so I decided to do some schematic analysis. It must be emphasised that, for three main reasons, Table 1 below is not any definitive summary:

- first, some of those who were listed may not have finally attended;
- second, I have tried to identify the speakers’ gender, but I am noting only what *appears* to be the case, from the conference announcements or internet sources – this may be inaccurate and may well hide intersex, transgender, non-binary, agender and further personhoods and identities;
- third, in classifying the main work or activity of the speakers, I have only used the work descriptions of the speakers in the conference announcements; this has limitations as I know that some people have a wider profile. Speakers who clearly had two different main forms of work or activity listed are noted as ‘hybrids’, with ‘0.5’ counted in each classification.

Bearing in mind the three limitations noted, there are still some broad observations that can be made about the figures. Here are a few:

- Most of the speakers, almost 70%, were men.
- There is some limited evidence of a modest increase in contributions from women over the ten years.
- Nearly half of the speakers are researchers.
- The next largest group is those working in the public sector.
- All the invited practitioners and politicians were men.
- All those speaking in the education event were researchers.

Table 1: Speakers in the Länsstyrelsen i Örebro län ‘Masculinity in Change’ conferences by gender, field of work/activity, and conference theme

	Researcher	Practitioner *	Activist	Author/journalist	Public sector**	Politician	Total	‘Hybrid’
<b>1</b> <i>Violence</i>	1W 2M	1M	0.5M	0.5M			<b>1W 4M</b>	2M
<b>2</b> <i>Health</i>	1W 1M	1.5M	1W 0.5M		2W		<b>4W 3M</b>	1M
<b>3</b> <i>Sport</i>	5M	1M	0.5M	1M	0.5M		<b>8M</b>	1M
<b>4</b> <i>Education</i>	2W 3M						<b>2W 3M</b>	
<b>5</b> <i>Power</i>	1W 2M	2M	0.5W 1M		0.5W 2M		<b>2W 7M</b>	1W 5M
<b>6</b> <i>Parent-hood</i>	0.5W 3M		1M		1.5W 1M		<b>2W 5M</b>	1W
<b>7</b> <i>Sexuality</i>	1W 1M	0.5M	0.5W 2M	0.5W 1M	1.5W		<b>3.5W 4.5M</b>	1W 2M
<b>8</b> <i>Politics</i>	2.5W 2M		1M		1.5M	3M	<b>2.5W 7.5M</b>	3M
<b>9</b> <i>Crime</i>	2W 2M		1M		1W 1.5M	0.5M	<b>3W 5M</b>	4M
<b>10</b> <i>Climate</i>	1.5W 1M	1M	0.5W 1M				<b>2W 3M</b>	1W 2M
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>34.5</b> (47.9%) <b>12.5W</b> <b>22M</b>	<b>7</b> (9.7%) <b>7M</b>	<b>11</b> (15.3%) <b>2.5W</b> <b>7.5M</b>	<b>3</b> (4.7%) <b>0.5W</b> <b>2.5M</b>	<b>13</b> (18.1%) <b>6.5W</b> <b>6.5M</b>	<b>3.5</b> (4.9%) <b>3.5M</b>	<b>72</b> <b>22W</b> (30.6%) <b>50M</b> (69.4%)	<b>24</b> (33.3%) <b>4W</b> (16.7%) <b>20M</b> (83.3%)

\* = doing direct work, for example, therapist, counsellor, psychologist in practice, social workers, youth worker, community worker

\*\* = employees of public sector organisations other than universities, and other than those doing direct work.

- All those speaking in the sport event were men.
- In addition, four events – those on violence, power, politics, and parent-hood – had a high proportion of men speakers.
- The events on – education, health, sexuality, crime, and climate – had a more even gender breakdown.

## 8. Why work across boundaries?

Following on from the table above, it is worth commenting that men were nearly twice as likely than women to be listed in the conference announcements as operating in more than one sector, what are called ‘hybrids’ here (83 % men:17 % women, compared with 69 %:31 % overall). This difference, however, could be a reflection of the self-descriptions sent by the speakers to the organisers, rather than a fuller picture of hybridity. For example, men may have tended to represent their more diverse relations to the topic, for example, as researcher and activist, perhaps enhancing credibility, while women may have tended to define their attendance in relation their main work or activity or the source of their invitation, even if they had diverse engagements, as, for example, activists.



Indeed, one of the features of this area of work around men, masculinities, change and equality is how many people work across boundaries between research, policy development, activism, and practical intervention. The conference series is thus in part a reflection of such boundary-crossings. There are both strengths and weaknesses in this; and in many ways, this kind of boundary-crossing is rather common in feminist, anti-racist, anti-ageist and kindred progressivist movements.

## **9. Which topics? What gaps?**

The selection of the topics for the conferences thus far has been wide: each has had a different focus, in order: violence, health, sport, education, power, parenthood, sexuality, politics, crime, and climate. Interestingly the most obvious gap has been the apparent lack of a conference focused on (paid) work, (un)employment, business, and money. This applies both at the level of everyday life and at the more macro-level of the economy. Similarly, the business sector and financial institutions seem to have been left alone. There is thus a marked 'welfarisation' of framings of men and gender equality. This picks up on the gender distribution of speakers of women and men in the conferences, with women speaking mainly in the events framed around welfare and more feminine-coded topics of education, health, and sexuality, and men predominant in the events on the more masculine-coded topics of violence, power, and politics.

The other main gaps would seem to be around: social divisions, for example, age, disability, ethnicity and racialisation; technology, such as ICTs; and, apart from the last conference on climate, the broader questions of environment, energy, mobility, and sustainability (Hearn, 2019). But the fact is: not everything can be covered, even in ten conferences.

## **10. How do individuals and institutions figure?**

Finally, there is the intriguing question of the relations of key individuals and particular institutions that make this kind of perhaps unique phenomenon possible. On most of the announcements, one or both of two names figure: Kerstin Lillje and Tomas Wetterberg. The dynamic dialectic, and relative impact, of particular key individuals and the wider organizational and political environment in many progressive (and indeed retrogressive) movements is a fascinating issue that deserves greater attention. This is an especially important question at the time of the clearly well organised anti-gender equality forces in Sweden and beyond.

The longer-term impacts and effects of the conference series depend much on how they work and engage with other organised activities around gender

justice, women's empowerment, and sexual politics, locally and beyond (van Huis and Leek, 2020). More gatherings for gender justice that engage with the relations of gender equality, resistance to patriarchy, and gender deconstruction are certainly needed now and in the future.

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C.A.N

UTLYSNING 2020

## Utlysning av medel för alkoholforskning

Systembolagets Alkoholforskningsråd delar årligen ut anslag till olika forskningsprojekt. Samhällsvetenskaplig och folkhälsovetenskaplig alkoholforskning prioriteras, tillsammans med forskning som är av särskild betydelse för det förebyggande arbetet mot alkoholskador. Tio miljoner kronor delas ut varje år. Av dessa är två miljoner avsatta för fokusområden som har identifierats som särskilt angelägna och där mer forskning behövs. Alkoholforskningsrådet ser gärna ansökningar från yngre forskare.

**Ansök via rådets ansökningssystem på [can.se](http://can.se).**

Sista ansökningdag är den 15 september 2020.



Administrationen sköts av Centralförbundet för alkohol- och narkotikaupplysning, CAN