

# Feminism without feminists?

*Gender and State Politics in Sweden, 1850-2000. A Round-Table Discussion*

## INTRODUCTION

**CHRISTINA FLORIN** Welcome to this round-table discussion. We are a group of scholars working in an interdisciplinary research project called "Gender, citizenship and state politics, 1848-1998". My name is *Christina Florin* and I am professor of history at the Institute for Future Studies. Our common aim in the research program is to cover 150 years of struggle for equal citizenship between women and men in Sweden. We want to analyse the relationship between Swedish feminist agency and state politics in a long-term perspective. Before I introduce the discussants of this panel I want to say some words about the project as a whole.

The main theme of the research program has been to study women's way to citizenship compared to that of men in a long-term perspective. How have women - through the women's movement in different periods - achieved citizenship? We do not focus exclusively on the status of rights and duties, but also on the practice of citizenship. How have women achieved autonomy and become political subjects with civil, political, social and economic rights in society? What are the relationships between women and the state seen over a long period? When we started this research programme we were somewhat provoked by a chapter in Joyce Gelb's book *Feminism and Politics* from 1989. In her analysis she claimed that Sweden is a "feminist country without feminists". She meant that the Swedish state had co-opted the radical feminist movement and disarmed the feminists at large. This manoeuvre has put feminists out of action by introducing a state feminism and a gender equality policy from above, without real connection to the grassroots in the women's movement, Gelb claimed.

This interpretation of Swedish political culture was a challenge for us; we felt the urge to question Gelb's analysis. Our experience from earlier studies said something else. We had seen a vivid and heterogeneous feminism in Swedish history and therefore we wanted to scrutinize the interaction between state

politics and the women's movement. Was the Swedish women's movement pursuing other policies than the international movement was? As historians we wanted to go back to the empirical material and the agents in order to look deeper into the complexities, the continuities and breaks within Swedish feminism and its relations to state politics.

The panel consists of scholars from different disciplines. I will let the participants introduce themselves and their projects in the chronological order in which they appear in our large research program.

**ULLA MANN** I am Ulla Manns, originally from the Department of History of Ideas, Stockholm University; now at the Department of Gender Studies, Södertörn University College. My own study in our project is called "The Construction of Sisterhood". It focuses on early Swedish feminism, mainly the pre-organized period 1840 to 1880. I am particularly interested in questions concerning citizenship and the role ethics and religion played. The matter of gender and class is also of great interest, since Swedish feminism very soon, when organised, became very homogenous concerning both gender and class.

**YVONNE SVANSTRÖM** My name is Yvonne Svanström and I come from the Department of Economic History at Stockholm University. My main research area during the last few years has been prostitution. I wrote my thesis on the regulation of prostitution in Sweden during the nineteenth century, and my new area of interest is prostitution in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My focus is on how the state and the women's movement have handled that question. The research period covers what is usually referred to as the period when the welfare state was formed in the 1930s through its retrenchment phase into the 2000s. Thus, it discusses the Swedish state and its relationship to prostitution from regulation, through liberalisation to criminalization. It is a period which is largely unresearched in this particular aspect, and research is just beginning.

**CHRISTINA FLORIN** I am studying sex suffrage activists, active in a radical network in the Swedish suffrage movement. My main interests concern these women's strategies in approaching the state through men: husbands, husband's networks, male friends, and family relationships. I am also

interested in their private lives and the private sphere as a strategy for the cause. How they mixed private and public is a fascinating topic. They were pioneers for the concept "the personal is political".

**KJELL ÖSTBERG** My name is Kjell Östberg. I am professor of History at Södertorn University College and director of the Swedish Institute of Contemporary History. I have written several studies on the development of the Swedish Social Movement, among them a book on the Swedish Women's movement after the vote was won after World War I. In this project I have been especially interested in women's activities and struggles in a perspective of long-time waves of radicalisation. I am one of those who think that major social and political changes in society are often linked to periods of radicalisation, where social movements play an important role. 1848, where our project starts, the turn of the last century, the years after WWI, the polarization during the 1930s and the 1960s and 1970s are such period of intense social struggles - and social reforms. Also, the social movements that have played such an important role in how Swedish politics were formed during those waves.

**EMMA ISAKSSON** I am a doctoral student at the Department of History of Ideas, at Stockholm University. I am working on a study of the new women's movement in the 1970s. More precisely I am looking at ideas about oppression of women and women's liberation expressed by the movement.

#### **KEY ISSUES**

There are some key issues we want to emphasize, issues that have become important for us:

- Patterns and trends in a long-term perspective.
- The relationships between the state and the women's movement — co-operation or conflict with men? Co-operation as a norm in Swedish political culture?
- Tricky questions: what kinds of issues have been difficult to put on the political agenda?
- The right to work: the importance of waged work in Swedish feminist

history.

- Sweden - a feminist country without feminists? Complications and contradictions in interpretations.

1.

*CF We have had a long-term perspective in our program? What advantages have that perspective given you in your separate projects?*

**UM** For me it has been of a great help. It has made it much easier to really see the characteristics or the specificities of the early women's movement. It has also made it easier for me to apply a historiographical perspective to my research. What I find most striking about the period (1840-1880) are two things. First, Swedish pre-organized feminism consisted of a lot of men. We often tend to forget that the women's movement did not automatically consist of women only. A lot of men were active in promoting women's emancipation during the 1840s and onwards. These men clearly took a feminist standpoint. They were often prominent intellectuals and politicians, mostly left-wing liberals. Quite often they were also religious, Christians with a liberal stand. Swedish feminists, in this period, were both women and men. Shared ideals, shared ideology — not gender, seem to have been the basis for the extensive reform work that took place in order to change women's social conditions. Second, the feminist agenda at the time consisted mostly of questions that we today without much hesitation would label as basic feminist questions; freedom and autonomy for women; freedom from abuse and dangers of different kinds; freedom to choose (particularly if to marry or not, to earn a living of one's own). A strong call for changed gender ideals was also heard, women should be recognized as rational and moral beings, capable of acting. In terms of citizenship civil as well as social citizenship was demanded. To see women as humans, as free and active individuals, was a dominating idea of women within early feminism, an idea often combined with thoughts about gender differences. The long-term perspective has also kept us, and perhaps me particularly, aware of the changing nature of the state. It is difficult to compare the Swedish state in the late 1990s with the state in the 1850s for example. In 1850 the Riksdag (the parliament) of four

estates still existed and only a few percent of the Swedish population had the formal possibility to take part in politics. The state at that time did indeed perform legal changes and was therefore regarded as an important institution for requests from the citizens, but it did not distribute welfare in a modern sense.

**YS** The long perspective has helped me to see the differences but also the similarities concerning the question of prostitution and the state and the women's movement. At this stage in my research it would seem that prostitution has been an issue on the feminist agenda at two points in time: around 1880-1900 and ninety years later, from the end of the 1970s, but most particularly in the 1990s. There have been periods when it has been a non-issue, submerged in questions of social policy. The state has also taken different approaches to the question. It has gone from seeing the woman as the perpetrator or offender, to seeing her as a victim, or rather, seeing the man, "the John", as a culprit. Regarding this question I would say that the initial aims of the early women's movement in the 1880s was emancipatory, but changed into promoting slower and less revolutionary reforms because of all the criticism it received. The demands a hundred years later from the state were reform oriented, but became emancipatory.

**KÖ** From a Swedish perspective it is striking that the development of the women's movement is closely connected to the periods of radicalisation, and so are some of the important reforms in favour of women: the right to vote after the First World War, the social reforms during the 1930s, the right to abortion or reforms linked to women's right to work in the 1970s and so on. This raises the question of the extent to which these gains have been a result of women's own struggle or of whether women have been surfing on the general wave? There are two important themes during the twentieth century that I want to emphasise: Firstly, women have had the capacity to organize in strong, independent organisations. Further on they have strived for and succeeded in establishing a far-reaching co-operation between different women's organisations, sometimes regardless of big differences in social and political composition. Secondly, one general aim of these independent organisations has been to reach equality with men.

## 2.

**CF** *Sweden is known for its woman friendly politics, its gender equality policies and its state feminism with special politicised professional state bureaucrats or femocrats. What have you found out about the relations between the state and the women's movement at different times? Has it always been "a happy marriage?" In second wave feminism during the 1970s for example, how did the more radical women at that time connect to state politics?*

**EI** The women's movement during the 1970s had, compared to the earlier feminist struggle, very little trust in the state and a weak connection to it. As in many other countries the Swedish movement was a part of the left wing movement and it had no organisational affiliations to party politics. Of course the Swedish movement addressed some demands to the state - such as abortion on demand and women's legal rights to paid employment on the same terms as men. But still, the movement was not interested in co-operating with the state since the state, in their view, represented both capitalism and patriarchy. The movement had a strong distrust in the state and were neither interested in gaining access to it nor in becoming integrated in it. In that respect one could say that this period represents a break, something new, in the history of the women's movement. But at the same time it is important to stress that during the same years there was also a strong feminist activity going on inside the state apparatus and within different political parties. The new women's movement in the Nordic countries was actually preceded by a discussion and practical struggle for women's rights initiated in the 1960s by liberals and socialdemocrats. During the 1970s, inside political parties and the public administration, these women and men worked for promoting women's full citizenship.

**YS** It would seem that the new women's movement in the 1970s was active against pornography and prostitution. One of the results of one of our colleagues, Ulrika Thomsson, shows that the movement actively participated in establishing an official investigation into prostitution. They

worked together with the women's organisations of the political parties. However, in the procedure coming after this official investigation they were no longer part of the decision-making structure, and the initiative was more or less taken over by the established parties' women's organisations.

In a sense, these organisations could more easily work together with the state, although questions of sexuality have been more difficult to put on the political agenda than others. In the early period feminists working for a deregulation of prostitution in the 1880s were more prone to cooperate with the state, but in a sense all these organisations have made demands on the state since questions of prostitution have primarily concerned changes in the law of some kind.

**UM** In the pre-organised period it seems to have been rather uncomplicated to turn to the state to achieve basic civil rights, legal changes and social reforms. Since many advocates and activists for women's emancipation were members of the Riksdag or had close affiliations to male members of the Riksdag (in the literary salons, within the families etc.), hardly any hesitation about co-operation with the state can be found.

**YS** Again I must add that concerning sexuality, the possible trend of co-operation with men is not self-evident, at least not in late 20th century debates. The political parties' women's organisations at the beginning of the 1980s, such as the Centre Women presented single bills, whereas the bills from the left are joint bills from both men and women. This seems to have changed over time, since during the 1990s there are joint bills across party lines, demanding the criminalization of the John, where representatives of the political parties' women's organisations joined in. This happened twice: in 1993 when women from the Social Democrats, the Left Party and the Liberals joined in a bill, and the next time in 1997 when a bill came which united all women party organisations except the Conservatives. Both bills demanded the criminalization of "the John".

**KÖ** One central aspect of the traditional Swedish social movements is the way they have been integrated in the state - mostly in periods of social demobilisation - and their close relations to the Swedish party system. In fact the parties have to a great extent been formed by these movements - the Social Democrats by the labour movement, the Centre

party by the farmer's movement, the Liberal Party by the temperance movement and free churches and the Green Party by the environmental movement. In several cases, especially for the Liberal Party, as Christina Florin has shown, the women's movement played an important role in this process. At the same time, the political parties in Sweden were for a long time extremely reluctant, you may even say hostile, to letting women play a role in politics. Their strategies for keeping the political power for themselves were well developed. It is striking that in this respect there was no visible difference between the parties. Communist and socialist men used the same arguments, and the same methods to keep women outside central politics, as did liberals or conservatives. When women found their way in politics, they did it initially by using the openings given by the development of the welfare state. These political reforms were often initiated by women, both in practice and as political demands. Family policy, childcare, and other 'soft questions' were given to female politicians as their domain. If this has been a way to bring women to the centre of politics - after all the welfare state is seen as the symbol of the Swedish model - or if it has been a blind alley, leaving economics and hard core politics unchallenged to men, that is one of the questions that has been discussed most among Swedish feminists during the last couple of years.

CF Kjell Östberg touches here on a very important and much debated issue in the Nordic and international gender research. How should the welfare state be looked upon from a gender perspective? By welfare state I mean a more distinctly intervening state formation from the 1930s onwards that is different from the liberal state that had existed before. There is a great deal of research on this issue and despite different opinions on whether the welfare state should be regarded as woman friendly or not, there seems nevertheless to be a shared view that the welfare state got a strong influence on the issues of gender. The welfare state intervened in women's lives in a new way - as contributor, controller and employer, but also as an institution that could become an arena for political change. The historian Helena Bergman shows for example how the women's movement was able to exert an influence on the state during "two formative feminist periods" - during the 1910s and the 1930s - when certain social conditions (for example demographic concerns) made it possible for women to become political actors and renegotiate previously existing gender relations.



Notions of gender are thus always integrated and recreated by the state, and political systems and the organisational structure of the welfare state have strengthened this phenomenon. The state is able to regulate the relation between the genders through legislation and political programs.

I myself have shown that we can trace a close connection in the 1960s between the state and the different women's organisations - the unions, the state bureaucracy, the professional scholars and liberal feminist organisations. Many men were also involved in the sex-role discourse. All this relates to our next question, the cooperation with state structures.

### 3.

*CF Has cooperation with state structures and male networks always worked in favour of feminist aims? What risks have there been for the women's movement and for feminists by having the state as a partner in political and social change? Has the state always been a friend or what has been on the hidden agenda of this woman friendly state discourse? A political culture of consensus with men? How strong has the norm of cooperation with men been in Swedish political culture?*

**UM** For the early period, cooperation with state structures and with men was both fortunate and necessary for women's liberation. But it was by no means sufficient. In the early years of organisation I think the activists themselves were not really aware of this. The eagerness to co-operate with the state was a major course to the pragmatism that soon came to dominate the first wave of organised feminism in Sweden. As a matter of fact the organised women's movement very soon turned strikingly pragmatic. Visions faded away gradually, the most critical ideas (on sexual morals and visions related to a new sexual order) lost their position within the women's movement's ideology. This, I think, was most certainly related to the ambitions to get integrated into state politics, to be recognized as a political subject and citizen. Another important factor for the rapidly growing pragmatism within Swedish feminism is that a whole generation of feminists in the first decades of the 20th century, i.e. during the intense suffrage campaigns, were

socialised into this pragmatic way of thinking and acting for women's emancipation. The focus was almost entirely upon gradual reforms and integration in state politics. These women were very active, very busy, appeared frequently before the public, speaking, agitating, debating, networking etc. Very often arguments were based on ideas of gender differences and an idea of separate spheres within society. This nurtured of course a specific, gender-segregated way of thinking about women and politics, about women and social reform work. As I see it a political integration project dominated during the suffrage years (1902-1921). This project did not help women much when suffrage had been won. Women should have the vote as an instrument for promoting further changes in society. The vote was supposed to guarantee or at least improve women's safety and justice. In Sweden critical approaches to social structures, to gender orders etc., did not flourish very much during this period, particularly not within organisations. This, I think, has very much to do with the unreflective attitude to co-operation with the state that flourished within the suffrage - and women's movement in the early 20th century.

**KÖ** Well, during the 1930s the real problem was to make politics of women's access to politics. As I said before men worked out strategies to keep women out of politics. And they were quite successful. In the mid-1930s still more than 97 percent of elected members in national and local parliaments were men. But the blame was put on women. They were too uninterested, inexperienced or uneducated to elect, men claimed. Every attempt to make this not a private but a political question was rejected. No affirmative actions, no programs to increase the number of women in politics were initiated.

**CF** A result of the co-operation with men has been a gender division of labour within politics. One of the suffrage movement's mistakes was without doubt not to question that gendered aspect of politics. The suffragists were not interested in the hard questions (finance, foreign affairs, international relations, etc.), only soft topics such as children, social policies, and family questions. They constructed a model for women's politics as something different from men's politics. They set the agenda themselves. That was a model that was cemented in the political culture.

#### 4.

*CF What have been the tricky questions in Swedish feminism? What questions have been difficult to make politics out of?*

**YS** I think questions of sexuality have been difficult to put on the political agenda. This would be both when it comes to prostitution, but also questions of violence against women and rape. There seems to be something about the state and the reluctance to step into the private sphere and regulate - at least when it comes to questions concerning the female body. Also, when the first women's movement (together with men) demanded the deregulation of prostitution they eventually won their goal. When the work was done it became a non-issue for a while, submerged in questions of social policies. Also, as Ulla Manns mentioned earlier, we must not forget that the access to women's bodies in marriage was long inscribed in the male definition of citizenship. It was not until 1984 that rape could be publicly prosecuted, i.e. the woman herself did not have to bring charges.

**UM** I totally agree. Without any doubt I would answer that tricky questions have been all those concerning sexuality and violence against women, and also questions related to married women. These were inflamed areas that very soon were put on the political agenda within the women's movement. In fact, sexual morals were the incentive for the women's movement to get organised at all. The claim for a new sexual standard, based on equality from a woman's perspective, was the reason why the first and the largest regular organisation within the women's movement, the Fredrika-Bremer-Association (Fredrika-Bremer-forbundet, FBF), started. Prior to the FBF a Swedish branch of the British and Continental Federation, with the aim to stop the regulation of prostitution, was founded in 1878, also with sexual morals related to gender equality in a top priority place. Questions concerning sexuality, sexual morals and of course men's sexual behaviour, were all early questions of great importance within the Swedish women's movement. This is important to remember when we today discuss whether the women's movement has been successful or not. The movement has not been able to gain support from the state in these issues, not in the

1880s and not even a hundred years later. Criminalizing "the John", how are we to understand that new law in Sweden? As a progress in real life, as only a formal progress or perhaps no progress at all? The Swedish state has very unwillingly paid attention to men in questions about equality or women's emancipation. The very first question of great importance for the pre-organised movement concerned, as I mentioned, married women's legal and social conditions. Again, these questions quickly put focus on men, the husbands. The demand for ending the husband's legal guardianship over the wife (*målmansskapet*) was raised already in the 1850s in the Riksdag. This fight ended 70 years later when the marriage law from 1734 was finally altered. This long and hard fight may be compared to the fight for suffrage. You are all familiar with the history around suffrage. It is pretty much the same all over the western world: a hard and long fight for power for women. Well, in Sweden the fight for women's suffrage started late, in the early years of the 20th century actually. The reform came into effect already 20 years later. How are we to analyse this, the fight for the vote and the quick recognition of women as political actors vs. the fight for married women's legal status as individuals? What questions have been possible to put on the agenda, what questions have been possible to transform into politics at all?

**YS** I would like to add to Ulla Manns' comment earlier, that the law against purchasing sex has fundamental practical problems. A while back we had these two parallel cases where a judge was caught, literally, with his pants down, buying sex from a prostitute. He was fined, but could keep his job. At the same time, a young woman at the National Police College was partly financing her studies by selling sex. She was expelled from her studies on ethical grounds. The judge had broken the law, and the police cadet had not. Thus, in practice the law is still dependent on old patriarchal norms and practices.

**CF** During the 1960s there was a lively activity within state bureaucracy to try to solve new problems for married women with small children entering the labour market (there was a shortage of labour at the time). Many new laws were discussed concerning individual taxation, childcare centres, parental leave, free abortion etc. At that time the state bureaucracy in some civil service departments acted as promoters for gender equality, but there were many women behind these policies as well.

**EI** I would argue that women's right to paid employment was the single most important demand posed by the women's movement in the 1970s. Questions such as rape, violence, sexual harassment, abuse, etc. seem to have been more difficult to organise around and against in Sweden. Sexual violence became the centre of attention several years later in Sweden than in many other countries. I think that the focus on paid employment in the 1970s has to do with the movement's relatively strong attachment to the left-wing movement. The women's movement was also, compared to other countries, much more influenced by the Marxist analysis of women's oppression as a product of capitalism. Radical feminist and lesbian feminist ideas were not so easily accepted and integrated in the Swedish women's movement. Questions concerning sexuality did not fit into the Marxist model as nicely as questions of work

**YS** On the question of work, I would like to add something to what Emma Isaksson said about work and the women's movement and the demand for the right to work. Women have more or less always worked in Sweden although legally restricted, and the right to work was one of the movements' earliest demands. Perhaps this is also one of the factors that has contributed to the more or less firm position of the Swedish women's movement not to look upon prostitution as work; in a country where the right to welfare and social benefits have been so strongly connected to work also for women, it can be more difficult to look upon prostitution as work. I don't know, but it is an interesting question, and research on this is only just beginning. There are still only single voices promoting prostitution as work that have been heard in the debate.

## 5.

**CF** *Very early, women's citizenship was seen as connected to women's work - not only to mothering and maternal duties. The right to work and earn a living of one's own has been a strong trend within Swedish feminist politics. Do you want to reflect upon this? And, why have Swedish women been so keen on working? Why choose work over love?*

**UM** It is important to be aware that the claims made by the women's

movement concerned special groups of women. In the early period most attention was paid to unmarried women's conditions, particularly their right to work. I suppose that two factors are important if one wants to dwell upon why work has been so present in Swedish feminism: When the woman question became crucial around 1840 it was because of the large group of unmarried women in need of financial support; this was largely due to a demographic imbalance. Many women (middle class women not the least) simply could not get married, they needed to work. Something had to be done!

An interesting thesis that the Swedish economic historian, Lena Sommestad, has presented is that because of the agrarian situation in the middle of the 19th century, Sweden did not develop as strong a separate-sphere ideology as in the US. In the 19th century Sweden was still a small agrarian country with a small population. The major part of the population still lived in the country, and these women of different "classes" did actually work. A long tradition of working women, not only within the working class, helped to create a strong tradition of working women. Some also point to the Lutheran Protestant culture, which also puts work in a central place of a person's life. Sweden has been very homogenous concerning religion and the Lutheran-Protestant church. However, one should not forget that the idea of separate spheres has been very prominent, not to say dominant, within Swedish feminism. The idea of motherhood has been strong here, both as a more biologically based idea of motherhood concentrated to the private sphere connected to duties such as childcare, education and morals, but also as a more socially constructed idea of motherhood, of maternal care taking place within the public sphere, within politics and social reform work.

**KÖ** First of all, I think it is important to stress that the right to work has been a central part of the struggle of the women's movement for at least a 100 years. And women active in and leading the women's movement have themselves been working. I think there is an interesting class aspect in this. Women have been acting as a class while at the same time acting for women's rights. Those women who have been in the forefront, struggling for women's right to work have to a large extent been women from the middle and upper classes. They have been teachers, nurses, clerks, and salespersons or have had academic professions. Nevertheless, they have been acting as wage earners, as a class. Not as a

class in a vulgar Marxist way, as industrial workers, and of course not a class as a social concept, (the social differences between' upper class physicians and typewriters were of course considerable) but as a class in a more profound Marxist way, as sellers of their workforce. And during some important periods, -between the wars and during the 1960s and 1970s for instance, demands connected to women's right to work have been central for the women's movement. I think that this class aspect is one the main reasons why women in Sweden have been able to form such strong alliances in spite of political and social differences.

**CF** Already the suffragists were eager to focus on women's work as a base for political citizenship. I would say that the idea of working women is an old tradition in Swedish culture.

**EI** Again I'd like to stress that paid employment was the central question for the women's movement during the 1970s. One explanation of this can, as I previously mentioned, be found in the fact that Marxist theory played such a dominant role for the movement. Another explanation is perhaps the long tradition of co-operation between men and women within the women's movement in Sweden.

## **6.**

**CF** *To sum up: What can we learn from the Swedish example? Is Sweden a feminist country without feminists? Should we see the state as an oppressor or a liberator? Should the state be seen as a male institution, an oppressor but also an institution that can be used as an instrument for change?*

**UM** There have certainly been a lot of feminists in Sweden, but I cannot support the idea of Sweden as a feminist state. Woman friendly, yes to some extent, but feminist? No! We still have a very segregated labour market, large wage differences, still a lot of violence against women, trafficking in women has increased in Sweden and so on.

**EI** One could perhaps conclude by saying that Sweden is not a feminist country, but it is a woman friendly country with lots of feminists.

**YS** On the other hand, the state has enforced a law against purchasing sexual services that some call a radical feminist law, a law that was a demand from parts of the women's movement. However, the discussions just recently of a new law on trafficking in Sweden are much less radical.

**CF** With this Round Table we have wanted to problematize Gelb's claim that "Sweden is a feminist country without feminists". By focusing on the relation between the state and women in a long-term perspective we have produced a more complex picture of mutual dependencies and exchange relations between women, men and the state. On such interactive occasions the women have often come forward as critical subjects questioning their own subordination, that is, acted as feminists.