

## “Well, it’s Difficult, Very Difficult” A Qualitative Study of the Gender Equality Work Aimed at Users at Three Public Libraries in Gothenburg

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### Abstract

This paper examines how gender equality work aimed at users is practised at three public libraries in Gothenburg. The underlying factors if gender equality work is *not* practised are also explored. The theoretical starting point for the study is the gender system with its two leading principles, the hierarchy and the dichotomy, as described by the Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman. Data was gathered by qualitative, semi-structured interviews with three head librarians. The results show that only one of the libraries explicitly practises gender equality work aimed at users, although different gender equality efforts is mentioned by another library. The gender equality work mentioned tends to focus on the library collections, and on attracting male users by offering what they are expected to be interested in.

There are several reasons why gender equality work is not practised, or practised to a larger extent, at these libraries; a lack of knowledge, based on a lack of awareness when it comes to the structure of the gender system and how it is manifested in public libraries, a lack of interest, and clear directions from the steering documents. Conclusions drawn from this study is that public libraries need clear directions from above, education regarding gender issues, and to survey the habits of men and women at their libraries, if gender equality work is to be practiced. In order to achieve real gender equality, it is important that public libraries think beyond a biological, traditional understanding of gender roles.

### Introduction

Sweden is often considered to be one of the most gender equal countries in the world. The Human Development Report 2006, for example, ranks Sweden in the fifth place when it comes to gender-related development and gender empowerment (United Nations Development Programme, 2006, p.366f). However, this does not mean that Sweden has no problems with gender inequality. Sweden, as well as the rest of the world, is part of a gender system characterized by gender separation and male superiority (Yvonne Hirdman, 1988). The gender system and gender equality will be defined and discussed below, see “Theoretical frame and definitions”.

During our first year at the Swedish School of Library and Information Science at Göteborg University and Höskolan i Borås, we noticed a lack of gender perspective when the public libraries’ democratic obligations towards their users were mentioned in lectures and literature. We found this inconsistency very interesting since our starting point is that the library sphere cannot be separated from the gender inequality in society. We decided to examine the subject of public libraries and gender equality in this paper.

Equality between the sexes is not explicitly regulated in the Swedish Libraries Act. Its second paragraph states that: “In order to promote interest in reading and literature, information, enlightenment and education and also cultural activities generally, every citizen should have access to a public library.” (Statens Kulturråd, 2007, Section 2) The meaning of “access” is not clearly defined. However, to prevent neglect of any citizen’s access to the public library, paragraph 8 and 9 of the Libraries Act specifies the need to prioritise certain groups in society, namely the disabled, immigrants and other minority groups, and children and youths. (Statens Kulturråd, 2007, Section 8 and 9) In this context, giving access to every citizen seems to be about taking into account that different groups in society live under different circumstances. For example, while the disabled might need improvements in the physical access to the library, children require media that is adjusted to their reading abilities. In our view, the Libraries Act should also take into account another important social and cultural factor, i.e. gender. According to the theory of the gender system (Hirdman, 1988) men and women live under different circumstances in society. This could affect their access to the library and its services.

Research shows differences in men’s and women’s usage of public libraries. According to statistics from the Swedish Arts Council, women generally visit libraries, borrow books and use other library services to a higher extent than men. (Statens kulturråd, 2003, p.50, p.62). Maria Hagelin and Ylva Rosen (2000), on the other hand, show in their master thesis that men are more diligent in visiting the public library in Gothenburg than women. However, differences in women’s and men’s usage of the library can still be seen. Men tend to use the library to read newspapers and play chess, while women borrow fiction and children’s books. Women also visit the library’s exhibitions and cultural arrangement to a larger extent than men. Even if these statistics do not show an entirely consistent picture, the differences in library usage according to gender could be an indication that women and men do not have the same access to the library’s services. In order for *all* citizens to have equal access to the public library, a gender perspective seems necessary. The question is if Swedish public libraries plan their activity with this in mind?

The aim of this study is to make visible and explore gender equality work aimed at users at public libraries in Gothenburg. "Gender equality work" refers to work done by public libraries in order to promote gender equality among library users and in society as a whole. During the research process we realised that this is not frequently practised. Therefore, the following two questions were developed:

- 1) How is gender equality work aimed at users practised at public libraries in Gothenburg?
- 2) If gender equality work is not practised, what are the underlying reasons?

The aim of the first question is to find out not only which concrete methods that are used, but also the underlying purpose of the gender equality work. In other words, what gender equality problems are identified by the public libraries and what is done about it? In the second question, we want to find the reasons for not working with gender equality, given by both the interviewees and as identified by us.

In order to narrow down our problem area to a manageable study object, we chose to focus on public libraries in Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city. Another limitation of the study is that we only focus on *public* libraries, since they are public institutions with a particular responsibility towards their users to promote democracy and equality (Unesco, 1994, Section 2). Finally, in this study, gender equality work refers solely to gender equality work *aimed at users*. Gender equality work in the public library as a workplace is not included. This choice

is due to the time limitation for this paper, and should not be seen as a statement that these two areas of gender equality work have nothing to do with one another. We are aware of the possibility that, for example, an even distribution of library staff according to gender could be one way for the public library to make all users feel equally welcome.

### **Theoretical frame and definitions**

Gender can be viewed in many different ways. One fundamental difference is whether you see men and women as biologically different when it comes to psychology, behaviour and abilities, or as categories created by the society we live in (Ulmanen, 1995, p.14f). Our feminist theoretical starting point in this paper is the theory of the gender system, as described by the Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman. This theory aims to explain how gender inequality, despite historical changes and progress, is maintained and reproduced in society.

The concept “gender” should, according to Hirdman be understood as something more complex than both “sex role” and “social gender” (1988, p.403). Instead, it is a whole process where human beings are culturally and socially created into their “masculine” or “feminine” gender (ibid., p.407). The gender system has two leading principles:

1. The dichotomy, i.e. what is male and female should not be mixed.
2. The hierarchy, i.e. the primacy of the male norm: the man represents what is normal and universal while the woman is divergent. (ibid., p.404)

According to Hirdman, the gender dichotomy exists everywhere, and structures activities, places and characteristics. The main manifestation of the dichotomy is in the labour division between the sexes and the ideas of masculinity and femininity. The two principles of the gender system are intimately linked and strengthen and legitimate one another: the gender hierarchy is dependent upon the gender dichotomy. (ibid., p.406) The unspoken contract that regulates what women and men can do at what time and in which society – e.g. what tools belong to whom, who seduces whom, how to speak, how to dress - is called “gender contract” by Hirdman. (ibid., p.408) Even if the gender contracts change with time, Hirdman shows that the gender system and its principles is reproduced and maintained. Hirdman says that the more powerful the gender dichotomy is the more legitimate and less questioned is the primacy of the male norm. The weaker the gender dichotomy is, the more illegitimate the male superiority is. (ibid., p.413f) In other words, in order to change the gender hierarchy, one needs to change the gender dichotomy.

The gender system is manifested in today’s Sweden in many ways. Examples of the dichotomy are that Sweden has a very gender segregated labour market, and that 80 per cent of all parental insurance days are used by women. Examples of the primacy of the male norm are that men as a group have a higher average salary than women as a group, and that 72 per cent of all directors are men. (Jämo, 2006, Section 1-3, 5) The gender system is also clearly manifested in the public library sphere. Even if the majority, 85 per cent, of all librarians are female (Statens Kulturråd, 2005, p.8), male librarians have a higher salary than female, regardless of age, education and sector (Statistiska centralbyrån, 2006). As shown in the introduction there are also indications of differences in library usage according to gender, both when it comes to how often and in what way the library is used.

Gender equality is often seen as primarily about increasing women’s access to male dominated areas. The dominance of women, as librarians and borrowers of books, in the public library sphere means that the issue of gender equality is somewhat more complex.

Maria Peippo (2005) claims in her master thesis that this female dominance means that the primacy of the male norm does not show in public libraries’ range of non-fiction. On the contrary, literature about what she calls “female” subject fields is more frequent, updated and borrowed more than literature in “male” subject fields. (p.53f) According to Peippo, this could be an indication that the selection of the range of literature is guided by women’s interests (ibid., p.48). If Peippo’s conclusions are correct, this could be one of the reasons why men do not use the public library to borrow books as often as women – their needs are not looked after. However, we believe that this question is even more complex. Another reason could be that the public library, commonly regarded as a “female” sphere and thereby subordinate according to the gender system, simply do not appeal to men. Also, Peippo’s study examines only non-fiction, which does not mean that the primacy of the male norm can not be seen in the range of other forms of media. However, the aim of this study is not to solve the complexity of this particular issue but to examine public libraries’ *actual* gender equality work.

In this study, gender equality – and gender equal access to the public library - is understood on the basis of the gender system: it can only be achieved by the transformation of both the gender dichotomy and hierarchy. This transformation can not be done only by changing the gender situation in the labour market and the domestic area with information, new laws and political measures. We see the relationship between men and women as a gender power relationship, where the category men dominate the category women, i.e. the society structure is patriarchal. This means that a change of the gender system is connected to radical changes in society. (Holmberg, 1993, p.15f)

### Earlier research

Since this study examines gender equality work aimed at users at public libraries in the context of the Swedish society, we chose to use only Swedish research about the subject. Our particular area of interest seems to be by and large uncovered so far. Having said that, we did find a few master theses in the field of Library and Information Science that in various ways deal with gender equality and gender equality work at public libraries.

The most valuable and influential study for us in this paper has been Hanna Nilsson’s master thesis from 2005. Nilsson examines how Swedish county libraries work with gender equality both among the personnel and aimed at users. The study shows that many county libraries do not have special policies for gender equality issues. Concrete gender equality work methods are usually restricted to the quantitative gender division of the library staff. Regarding the outreach activity, the gender equality work is most frequent when it comes to children. The gender equality strategies are often based on separating the sexes even though the main purpose is to eliminate the differences between men and women. The reasons why the county libraries do not work more with gender equality is a lack of knowledge, resources and requests from public libraries. Generally, the librarians are positive to include gender equality as a part of their work.

The master thesis of Cecilia Kristiansson and Peter Stenberg (2006) shows that two dominating discourses coexist and determine the direction of how gender equality is discussed and worked with at Malmö public library: *The discourse of gender role preservation* is mainly used when discussing personnel policies and when recruiting, and is based on a biological view on gender. This leads to a preservation of traditional gender roles. *The discourse of gender role transformation* is mainly seen when discussing the public dimension of the library’s functions. It sees men’s and women’s different behaviours as socially constructed,

and focuses on making the library a gender neutral workplace where all visitors feel welcome and get their needs fulfilled. This discourse challenges and transforms current gender roles, and is the most influential discourse in the study

The master theses by Eva Gustavsson Grimstedt (2006) and Cecilia Kristiansson (2003) both investigate how children’s librarians deal with gender issues in their work when acquiring and mediating books to children. The studies show that the reviews from their vendor, Bibliotekstjänst, very seldom mention gender issues, and that the individual librarian’s view of gender has an influence when it comes to changing gender-linked reading habits. Kristiansson’s study also show that the librarians see their possibilities to influence children’s reading habits as limited.

## Method

This paper has an exploratory approach with the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of the subject. The aim is not to draw any general conclusions about the population in the study. Therefore, a qualitative interview method was chosen. (Bryman, 2002, p.115) An advantage with qualitative interviews is that they tend to be flexible towards the direction of the interviewees’ answers, and that the focus of the study can be adjusted to the important issues that show up during the interviews (ibid., p.300). We chose to interview the head librarian in three different public libraries in Gothenburg. The interviews were performed in a semi-structured manner. According to Bryman, this method is preferable when the interviews are done, as in this case, by multiple researchers, in order to secure a certain amount of comparability (ibid., p.304). We analysed our interviews with an analysis method inspired by grounded theory (ibid., p.377). We examined and compared the material by identifying recurring themes on the basis of our two research questions and Hirdman’s theory of the gender system.

## Results and analysis

The results of the interviews will here be presented on the basis of our two research questions, and continuously analysed with the gender system in mind. The interviewees, and the libraries they represent, will be named A, B and C. All information that can lead to an identification of our interviewees has been changed, including their gender. Even if it could be interesting to see if the gender of the interviewees might affect their answers, we chose to prioritise their anonymity.

### *How is gender equality work aimed at users practised at public libraries in Gothenburg?*

Library A is the only public library in this study that explicitly practises gender equality work aimed at users. Library A works with gender equality in two ways: They try to balance the overrepresentation of female library users by purchasing media “that somewhat prejudiced, but anyway, is mainly aimed at men.” A does not elaborate on this further, but a reasonable interpretation is that A refers to media that traditionally is seen as “male”. Library A also recently started a project, that A “hopes is part of their gender equality work”, in a suburban residential area with many inhabitants from foreign countries. The aim of the project is to reach out to immigrant women who do not use the library by establishing library activity in their immediate surroundings. In comparison to the other interviews, this project stands out in a couple of ways: it is an outreach project, while other efforts mainly concentrate on the library collections, and it focuses on trying to attract female users. On the basis of that A does not seem sure if this is a gender equality project or not, and that none of the interviewees mention that a lack of female users is a problem, this seems to be a project concerning

ethnicity rather than gender. This focus can be explained by that while ethnicity is mentioned as a prioritised area in the Swedish Libraries Act, gender is not.

Library B does not explicitly work with gender equality aimed at users, although different efforts connected to it is mentioned during the interview. B says that the public library has a commission to reflect the political debate in society, therefore library B makes an effort to purchase literature about for example gender role issues. B also tries to increase young boys’ reading habits: “Since young boys often read less literature [than young girls] and can be a group that is difficult to reach, we try to find books that are easy to read, that boys might be interested in. This means that you sometimes must lower the expectations of quality. Gender equality work is often the opposite for us.” With this statement, B connects gender equality with efforts only concerning women. Since library B is dominated by both female librarians and users, the range of the library tends to be more aimed at women, according to B. “They [the women] often ask for books about knitting and similar subjects and I might have interests in the other direction.” As an example, when it comes to film, B tries to include “a good thriller every now and then” to balance all the “relationship dramas. [...] There should be something for everyone. If that is gender equality work, I don’t know.”

In the methods and efforts mentioned by A and B, there is a tendency to try to attract an equal number of male and female users by offering what each gender is expected to be interested in. In a society structured by gender hierarchy and dichotomy, this approach is understandable since it could be an efficient way for a female dominated library to attract male users. However, as the differences between men and women here are based on a biological view of gender, the risk is that it only leads to a recreation of the gender system. Hirdman (1988) clearly shows that in order to change the gender structure in society, i.e. male superiority and female subordination, the dichotomy must be transformed. Gender equality can not be achieved by using the before mentioned method alone; the public library must at the same time question and actively try to change traditional gender roles when it comes to for example reading habits and usage of the libraries’ resources.

C says that gender equality work is not practised at library C “but maybe it is practised in a subconscious way, for example when we purchase media, and that we in some way try to satisfy everyone’s interests, also when it comes to gender.” Even if library C does not work concretely with gender equality, C more than the other interviewees show general gender awareness and a view of gender as being socially changeable. For example, C mentions an unexpected consequence of the development of audio books, namely that men read more fiction. “Many men have jobs where they travel a lot, or drive, truck drivers, and then they have discovered that it is nice to listen to books and these are often fiction. And men have said that they would never have read this if it didn’t exist as audio books. That’s positive I think, that a new media can affect habits in this way.” This quote shows an example of how public libraries can work with changing gender patterns on the basis of *experienced* needs, rather than the *expected* interests of men and women.

*If gender equality work is not practised, what are the underlying reasons?*

As previously shown, gender equality work aimed at users is not frequently practised at the libraries in this study. Even if A mentions two different projects, the library does not work with gender equality to a large extent. Thus, the interviews, and our analysis, ended up focusing on finding the reasons for this. When asked why gender equality work is not practised, B says “I don’t really know how that kind of work could be done”. C expresses something similar: “Well, it’s difficult, very difficult.” A also expresses that it is a difficult

area to work with. A lack of knowledge therefore seems to be a significant factor why gender equality work is not practised. However, this lack of knowledge can be connected to a lack of *awareness*. Several areas of unawareness can be identified in the interviews, both when it comes to the steering documents, the structure of the gender system and how it is manifested in public libraries. This unawareness and other reasons why gender equality work is not practised will be presented in the following text.

The steering documents for the library activity mentioned in the interviews are library objectives, local policies and various policies, including the budget and the gender equality plan, for the city of Gothenburg. B and C both express a lack of clear directions concerning gender equality work aimed at users from the steering documents, and say that it is up to each individual library to work with it or not. C adds: “And then it might not be the first thing you do, sit down and work out a gender equality plan when you’re not obliged to do it.” One of the most important steering documents seems to be the budget for Gothenburg city. According to C, next year’s budget is meant to give clearer instructions about gender equality. “Then something will probably happen”. When examining the budget for Gothenburg 2008, it gives, as C points out, more concrete instructions how gender equality work should be carried out (Göteborgs Stad, 2007a, p.12). Interestingly enough, *this* year’s budget also clearly states the importance of working with gender equality in every area, and that it is the responsibility of the directors to gain knowledge about it and apply it on the activity (Göteborgs Stad, 2007b, p.12). Even if the steering documents could be clearer when it comes to gender equality *aimed at users*, it seems like it comes down to a question of interpretation, and in the long run interest, from each library. A says that the gender equality plan focuses on the personnel, but since public libraries work towards the public, Library A has interpreted the plan to also include users. Library A is the only library in this study that has done this interpretation, and consequently practises gender equality work.

All interviewees have noticed clear differences in men’s and women’s usage of the library. B says that female, middle aged users tend to ask more questions, while if you do a survey, men are more frequently present at the library. “That is also a part of the gender roles, that they ask for different things.” C says that women tend to borrow fiction to a larger extent than men, and that men borrow non-fiction and spend time at the newspaper section more often than women. Despite this, no efforts are made to equalize the differences. Library A has also noticed gender differences. A survey carried out in the library showed that most of the library’s users are female, therefore attracting male users is a prioritised goal. We think that there is an important connection here. It is only library A, which has the gender differences in writing, that actively does something about it. This is clearly shown as C continues to explain why they do not work with gender equality: “...because, I mean, it always comes down to subjective values when you, eh, do this. [...] Maybe we’re not completely aware of this. And besides, we don’t know if we have, if we give preferential treatment to any of our users because of their gender.” Our impression is that the interviewees connect the issue of gender inequality to subjective values and not facts, regardless of statistics. This seems to be another important reason why gender equality work is not prioritised. For example, A says that they would work more with gender equality “if it would become a fact, through research, that one gender is prioritised over another.”

The priority of other areas, such as children and immigrants, seems to be a general theme in the interviews. This can not only be explained by paragraph 8 and 9 of the Swedish Libraries Act. Even if gender equality work is said to be actively practised at library A, A says that: “We don’t see it as a huge problem but it’s something that we have put on the agenda and

would like to work with. [...] It is not dramatically, in my opinion. There are other issues.” Our interpretation of the interviewees’ answers is that gender inequality simply is not considered to be a major problem at public libraries. At the same time, they all say that the overrepresentation of female librarians might be problematic because it could lead to a library range more aimed at women. Also, A and C envision a gender equal library to have an equal number of male and female librarians and users. A conclusion of this is that the interviewees seem to think that gender equality only concerns women, and because women are not underrepresented in the public library sphere, gender inequality is not a problem. In other words, they are only aware of one of the principles of the gender system: the hierarchy, but they lack an awareness of how this is connected to the dichotomy.

None of the libraries in the study has appointed a specific person responsible for gender equality issues, or educated their staff regarding this. A says that gender equality is a general task that everyone has, and that the policy is to avoid discrimination regardless of ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender. According to B, gender awareness underlies the library activity in most cases, although “it’s not explicitly said or written down, it’s something that feels obvious.” C says that libraries in general are very aware of gender equality regarding personnel issues, when recruiting and so on. Even if gender equality work aimed at users has not been discussed much yet at library C, C thinks that many librarians often have an awareness concerning equality in general due to public libraries’ historical tradition of wanting to reach out to all groups in society. “I’ve never reflected that much about this even if one is always somehow aware of it.” In sum, the interviewees show a tendency to think that “general gender awareness” is sufficient in this matter. While this is a good start, it is questionable if it is enough. As the results of this study show, there is an obvious risk that the gender equality issue will be neglected.

## Conclusions

Even if no general conclusions can be drawn in this study, the results show several interesting tendencies. One could question if these tendencies are representative for public libraries in Gothenburg since we only examined three of them. However, we do not believe that it is a coincidence that the libraries examined here do not practice gender equality work aimed at users to a larger extent. While contacting possible interviewees, we noticed a pattern; that many libraries did not work with this issue at all and therefore had no interest in participating. We interpret this as an indication that our results are reliable. Also, the steering documents regarding public libraries do not explicitly regulate this issue, which means that it is likely that other public libraries also interpret them as they see fit.

The results from our study agree with earlier research by Nilsson (2005) for example in the way that the public libraries lack special policies for gender equality issues, and that they seem more focused on the quantitative gender division of the library staff than gender equality work aimed at users. Nilsson’s study also shows that gender equality work aimed at children and youth’s are practised to a larger extent than other areas. However, this is not the case at the libraries we examine. Thus, the results of Gustavsson Grimstedt (2006) and Kristiansson (2003) are not applicable to our study. Although, one similarity is that Kristiansson’s study also shows that the individual librarian’s view of gender has an influence when it comes to changing gender-linked reading habits. Even if we have not done a discourse analysis in this study, traces of both the discourses of gender role preservation and transformation, as described by Kristiansson and Stenberg (2006), can be identified in our interviews. Unlike Kristiansson and Stenberg, we find that the discourse of gender role preservation is the most



frequently expressed. A reason for this could be that their interviewees are members of a gender equality group at Malmö public library.

The gender equality work practiced by the public libraries in this study tends to focus on the library collections, and on attracting male users by offering what they are expected to be interested in. Our conclusion of this is that public libraries face a difficult dilemma when working with gender equality issues; how can more male users be drawn to the library without using efforts based on the gender dichotomy? To achieve real gender equality, we believe that public libraries must think beyond a biological, traditional understanding of gender roles, and make an effort to fight both principles of the gender system at the same time.

The reason why gender equality work is not practiced at all, or to a larger extent, at these public libraries are a combination of several factors; lack of knowledge, awareness, interest and clear directions from the steering documents. The conclusion is that in order to practice gender equality work aimed at users, public libraries do not only need directions from above, but also education regarding the gender system and its consequences for the public library. To increase the interest in gender issues, each library needs to survey the habits of men and women at their libraries, to see if there are any gender differences and how these are manifested.

Finally, the public library is seen as an institution founded on democratic traditions, where “all” users are looked after. As shown, this is questionable. A logical conclusion of the indication that male users are underrepresented at public libraries, as demonstrated by both research and our interviews, and that not much is done to equalise this, is that men and women do not have equal access to the library. In other words, this is an area where much work still needs to be done. Hopefully the results of this study could be a part of that process.

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