

Societies of Married Women

Forums for Identity Building and Female Discourse

Brit Berggreen

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During the 19th century and into the 20th the general attitude towards women was that they should be obliging and submissive. Contesting notions that this pattern should be a historical universal this paper suggests that there have been associations of married women as collective standard setters. Serving as collective authority units such associations have supported and directed patterns of female authority within household circles. Exploring this view circumstantial evidence has been found in folklore and observations of Norwegian folk life. Continuing a discussion started by the Finn Uno Harva (1944) additional material has been provided from communities in contemporary Greece where annual celebrations take place among married women to celebrate fertility with the midwife as the centre of the festival. Finally a guild model for married women's societies is proposed, suggesting that their main product – vital for the well-being of the community as a whole – is the offspring, not at the moment of birth, but nurtured and shaped into the approved standard.

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Introduction

When Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was at his hottest in the news surrounding the Gulf War 1990–91, I was watching a CNN interview with a 6–7 year-old boy. He was upset at the report of Saddam's actions, and I heard his serious and indignant voice: "Why can't anybody tell his mom what he's up to." This has struck me as having to do with another episode which involved a woman, whose son, when reaching the age of about 13, confided in her that "frankly" he was a little scared of her. Very upset she told her husband, and was calmed down by the answer: "All boys are afraid of their mothers." I choose to see these episodes as reminders of Mother as an authority, perhaps the ultimate authority in the minds and lives not only of boys, but of girls, and of adults as well. I see it also as a reminder of the often blurred borders between love and respect, and between respect and fear. Modern women in western urban societies have been socialized into being loved as the obvious aim,

and feel guilty when expressing anger. Modernity has introduced an image of womanhood based on the tender and loving female paragons of popular educators. Postmodernity seeks the pre-modern, and may find alternative paragons varying according to time, place and social belonging.

In this paper I shall go back in time, searching for the authority of married women as individuals and as members of women's societies in close knit communities. The standards of housewives have been much noticed and discussed, and gradually and increasingly studied in the context of housewives' own agreements. Such standards are factual, but need investigation to be culturally visible. There have been closed societies of women, to which men have been denied access. Such societies have been more or less formalized, ranging from women of specific neighbourhoods to networks of friends or kin (cf. Smith-Rosenberg 1975). There have been fields, which have been the sole domain of women, where men have been denied the right to inter-

here. In traditional rural Norway housewives had their areas of responsibility, until modern notions of a woman's place, and of the male as her supervisor penetrated all social classes. Except as a set of norms the cultural process is hard to pin down. Such notions began with the bureaucratic bourgeoisie in Europe's leading nations during the last half of the 18th century. In Norway it took hold later, around 1830–40. Real authority is more easily concealed than formalized hierarchies with authority assumed through conventions. People conceal behaviour which deviates from cultural prescription (Berggreen 1990). What should interest us is women's acceptance of male supremacy and the powerful vehicles for spreading the notion. That males grasp the notion is less intriguing. In Norway there was a noticeable change in attitudes and practices, like barring women from the vote, which was liberally granted to men in 1814, and explicitly barring women from university education in 1836 (Hernes 1982). In several ways the *Zeitgeist* expected women to keep a low social profile except in the ballrooms and at the teapot. This period lasted until ca 1880 when women openly were organized to fight for the vote (obtained in 1913). They were granted access to the University in 1882. During this time span, from ca 1830 to ca 1880 external authorities also contributed to breaking up traditional patterns of domestic management and neighbourhood organizations in the local communities. The modern notions of womanhood – with the man as the superior – was preached from the pulpits and entered the minds of common people as patterns through school-books, but not always as practice.

Some evidence of women's independence of male opinions can be found in derogatory nicknames for women who let themselves be dominated by their husbands. *Nikkedukke*, literally meaning a nodding doll, *godfjotte*, “a simpleton”, and *mehe*, “a spineless person” are among them. Certainly there are also nicknames for husbands, who let themselves be bossed around by their wives, but this is not my topic here. Somehow the *idea* of the submissive wife has been confused with the *factually* submissive wife, whom it is hard to respect or admire, but easy to pity.

My research has convinced me that there have been conventions or codes between women regarding what kind of behaviour was or was not acceptable, whether among themselves, their daughters, sons or husbands. These codes and conventions were not necessarily fixed, but constantly renegotiated through comments and discussions. It is worthwhile to consider a “society of married women” as comparable to a crafts-guild, where the behaviour is strictly controlled to secure the survival and welfare of guild members (Berggreen 1973). Let us leave the common view of women as vigilant narrow-minded and mean gossips and rather see them as bosses, indeed as workshop masters, with a rational approach to the management and allocation of time and resources. Among (traditional) married women the main product was the child, not just the newborn, but the child developed into a responsible adult person. Just as the dabbler (No. *fusker*, Ger. *Pfuscher*) was a threat to the guild members, irresponsible offspring producing illegitimate children upset not only the individual household to which he or she belonged, but the whole community of neighbours, who were depending on each other in the daily toil and on social occasions. It was a social convention that children belonged within the setting of marriage.

Resource management and behaviour according to rules were of vital importance for a community of neighbours. For men and women alike marriage was the entrance ticket to full membership in the community. To give birth was a privilege for married women, or at any rate, a community of married women decided whether an illegitimate child was a shame or not.

Forums for setting standards and giving evaluations are my concern here. For decades women have been told that they are the managers of soft values, and the virtuous virgin and the tender and loving mother have been hailed in literature and promoted by presentations of the ideal family life in school readers. Traditional notions of womanhood have yielded to doctrines of woman's nature, especially since the 18th century when Rousseau's Sophie and Richardson's Pamela entered the minds of the novel reading public. The virtuous Lotte of

Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* should also be mentioned in this connection. These characters have become the new dream women for men, figures they might want their women to emulate. These females were creations by and for the needs and wishes of male fancy, perhaps women dreamed up as a contrast to those they knew from real life. We may see ideal patterns as wishful interpretations of the Natural Law (*natturret*): "A petty bourgeois family pattern implying an amenable and mild home wife achieves the status of being a *natural*, sensible and good arrangement", writes Jon Hellesnes (1974:70) and claims this as a deficit of Rousseau's thinking and writing.

My presentation is based on a search for arenas of women's authority, and especially on findings suggesting the way married women have set standards and carried them out. I am searching for a "wife-power" (*konevelde*), discussed by law historian Gudmund Sandvik (1978). It is especially in Norwegian circumstantial evidence that I have begun my search, but field work experience from Greek Macedonia has provided me with new perspectives and the courage to set my discussion within a larger European framework. My presentation is tentative, based on work in progress.

Strict mothers, kind fathers

Today it is acceptable to talk about both a female and a male part of the same person. "The female part of me wants to embrace the audience, the male part of me wants to conquer it", I heard a female opera singer say in a radio interview. The same day a male film-maker talked about "letting out the female part of himself". The present *Stand der Forschung* is turbulent and the socially hermaphroditic man or woman is becoming accepted. This is complex territory. Still I venture into it, turning my back to the present. The pre-modern is my concern.

Let me first turn to the topic of being afraid of one's mother. The shrew, hanging out the window, loudly scolding her own offspring and even those of others, demanding good behaviour, has been expelled from good company, just as the wife with the rolling-pin has been banished to the cartoons. In the mid 1970s Anne

Louise Gjesdal Christensen started her search for the soft mothers among working-class and lower middle-class people, but what her informants said, thinking back on their childhood was this: "Father was kind, but mother was strict."

A fair amount of this must have to do with women's strength, authority and power as her husband's partner, earning his respect and the respect of others. This authority was exercised within her domain. Such domains have more often than not been overlooked. Within Norwegian cultural historical research, however, there has been a long-term research program going on from ca 1940 until the 1970s on peasant/farm communities and rural neighbourhoods (*Gards- og grannesamfunn*. The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture in Oslo). The material is largely unpublished, but the former director Rigmor Frimannslund, lectured for a generation of European ethnologists at the University of Oslo on the basis of this material, spreading the message of equality between husband and wife as administrative heads of separate spheres. This should be mentioned, even if here is not the place to present the material nor to list Norwegian titles dealing with the topics.

The significance of marriage

There is an anecdote circulating about the Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf after she had become world famous as a novelist and a Nobel Prize winner: She was at a dinner party, and being a most celebrated woman she found it reasonable to begin to move towards the table when the party was asked to take their seats. But the hostess stopped her with the words: "The wives first, Selma dear." Whether true or not it illustrates a main topic in this presentation, namely the dividing line between married and unmarried women. This has become so blurred in our contemporary culture that there is reason to remember the former aspect of marriage as the precondition for full membership of the adult peasant society, in this case for both women and men. The differences in privileges (and obligations) ranging from the young married woman, the established wife, the widow or the retired old woman in traditional societies,

such as among Norwegian peasants, is something we today must be reminded of because we no longer have the same system of responsibility, dependence, rights and duties as before. Their rank was mirrored in the elaboration of their dress.

"Before" here means especially the time before ca 1850, but with offshoots into our own days. Limits in time are hard to set because attitudes continue to exist and appear unexpectedly even when they are believed to have disappeared. My methodological strategy is above all to seek situations where (married) women act with confidence, and see themselves as respectable wives who observe the codes of their peers and manage their time and resources in interplay with others, according to peer standards. There is a special word denoting this, namely *koneære*, which literally means "wife's honour". The legal concept of "key power" (Ger. *Schlüsselgewalt*), is another term to consider. This term belongs within Germanic law as has been discussed by Danish law historian Inger Dübeck (1978). I shall refer to some well-known Norwegian folklore, and then to a women's festival in Greek Macedonia, where I have taken part for two consecutive years and otherwise observed at second-hand.

Folklore

One of the better known Norwegian popular ballads is about "Paul and his hens" ("Pål sine høner").¹ It is now categorized as a children's song with Pål seen as a small boy fearing his mother's wrath, after a fox has taken the hen he should look after. It would not be of much consequence if this were a matter between a son and his mother, but a closer study reveals that Pål is the husband, afraid to come home to his wife, *mor* (No. *matmor*, literally "food-mother"). In one version of the ballad his fear is so strong that he considers emigrating to America rather than confront "mother".

We do not need much insight into housewife rationality to put the loss of a hen into an irritating context of loss of time and resources. Let us play a little with the everyday issues behind the fox-takes-hen situation. Egg-money was a cash income for women, and even when

the eggs were not sold, they were valuable items in the household diet. A hen that had stopped laying eggs might at least be made into a soup. To replace a hen meant either the expense of buying another one, or time consumed in hatching and feeding a chicken till it became an egg-laying hen. All hens are not good egg-layers, so the original hen was not necessarily compensated. In addition to her loss, the wife most likely was disappointed and cross because Pål had not paid attention. His failure in turn is a strike against the reputation of the household: Mother has a careless man in her economic sphere. We should remember that in the song there is also an allusion to his having lost the flour the day before when he was at the mill to have the grain grinded.

A luckier man in the world of folk tales was *Gudbrand i Lia*, also known from the stories of Hans Christian Andersen ("Father is always right"). Gudbrand started out to sell a horse and continued bartering until he returned home empty-handed. The ironiclement in this story, what makes it appear beyond reality, is that his wife is not only understanding, she positively applauds his stupidities as he confesses them.

In the first narrative we have a wife who becomes angry, in the second, one who surprises us by miraculously *not* becoming angry. The structural basis of dumb man and authoritative wife is present in each of these pieces of folklore.

The main issue, then, is not whether men are afraid of their wives or if boys are afraid of their mothers. I shall take one more step and ask: *Whom is mother afraid of?* It is well-known that the neighbours directed behaviour mutually in close-knit societies. "*What will the neighbours say?*" was a question that had to be asked. In these circumstances my question concerning whom mother fears may be seen as only rhetorical. We know that women were standard setters, or perhaps rather keepers of respectability, keeping an eye upon each other and upon each others' offspring. We know that there was a hierarchy of women. Her attire would show her status, not only as married or unmarried, but also as a newly-wed or an established married woman. The young wife was attired differently from the established wife, and the old wife had yet another form of dress.²

Societies of married women

I have had the opportunity of being involved first-hand with an organized community of married women through participation in the celebration of the midwife in the village of Monoklissiá in the administrative district of Serres in Greek Macedonia. There are many unanswered questions concerning this festival, and much guesswork as to its age and origin (Berggreen 1995). Thus I shall state only what the women themselves claim. They told me that when their foremothers came as refugees in 1922 from Eastern Thrace in Turkey, they brought the custom with them. The general version of this practice is, that each year on January 8th they gave themselves the liberties of men. They took over the village café and sent the men home to cook and clean and look after the children and the elderly sick while they granted themselves a delightful day for festival and fun open to women. They played *távoli* (backgammon), smoked tobacco, played cards and drank alcoholic beverages, danced in the streets and ended the day with a gigantic feast with orgiastic elements. It was a celebration for married women only, until unmarried women were allowed in from 1990 on. In the centre of the celebrations was the midwife. At some stage the women in this village had begun to call their celebration the Women's Rule or *Gynaecocracy* day. In a neighbouring village the women celebrated under the name of The Midwife's Day.

When I participated in the 1990 festival in Monoklissiá unmarried women were allowed in for the first time. This particular year the celebration was such: The day before the actual festival there was a collecting of victuals or money to buy provisions for the evening meal and the premises were prepared for the celebrations. The women had had their own assembly house since 1962 when the women's organisation, the *Lysistráte* (Lysistrata), had it built. Since then they were independent of the men's village café. In the assembly house textiles were arranged to decorate the shelves and a low oriental table set in front of the fireplace. Also a miniature of an ox cart was taken down from the top of a cabinet and put on exhibit in a more prominent place. This cart should remind them

that they were peasants. (Some years earlier a real horse cart was used and driven around in the village, filled with jolly women. Now there were only tractors in the village.)

On the actual day of the festival there is a gathering of women, dressed in regional costumes and male musicians in women's clothes, those which were originally used in the village, and much plainer than the gaudy garments the women now wear. The musicians are not from the village. "Gypsies", the women explained, and at least one of them looked like one. These men take part during the whole day's celebration. The younger women carry victuals to the kitchen gang of older women, who are in plain clothes. One of the most prestigious tasks is to manage the cooking. The younger helpers dance their way to the kitchen premises with bread baskets and vegetables.

Next comes a dance through the village, the women following the musicians or vice versa, to every house. There they claim tributes from those who are at home, and they visit the eldest women, who appear in their black widows' garments, followed by a daughter or daughter in law. These eldest are warmly greeted and hugged. Men who are encountered are chased and splashed with water from a little tin bucket with a basil twig.

After the tour through the village the women go back to the assembly house for a meal. Then it is time for the main procession. This takes place to honour the midwife, *bábo*, *mammí* or *maía*, which she is alternately called. On a tray there is water, olive oil, soap and a towel, and some kind of a phallic symbol (leeks are quite common). The *bábo* receives the procession and entertains the most prominent women on her balcony, where a low table and cushions are set out. A lot of joking and laughter goes with the encounter. Afterwards the *bábo* leads the dancing and joyful procession back to the assembly house. (In 1991 one woman simulated a birth with a plastic doll that was "born", fully clothed, then later undressed and "baptized" in a plastic tub at the square outside the assembly house, the women sang and performed all the ceremonies otherwise belonging to the church liturgy.)

The next and most serious session was a formal lunch for invited representatives of the

local administration, the mayor and others. During this political segment of the festival the women give and receive information on the importance of women in society; the president of the Women's Association is the main hostess.

The evening celebration is the plenary gathering. The eldest women sit as guests of honour while the younger ones dance. Here there is space for any whim, and the women have great fun simulating the behaviour of men, especially through slapping bottoms, or lifting skirts to peep underneath. The climax is a skit/tableau with sexual-orgiastic elements, which the male musicians must not see. They have been playing the whole night. Now the curtains are drawn for the first time, blocking their visual contact with the celebration. Sexuality is referred to in a lively manner throughout the celebration. Sometimes, the women explain, men have tried to sneak into the celebration, dressed as women. Such an occurrence belongs to the great happenings which the women relate over and over again. To chase such men and drag the clothes off them belongs to the hurly-burly, and is retold with intense, delighted and malicious pleasure. At around 11 p.m. the party is over. The last participants dance with their coats on before leaving, reluctantly.

I took part again in 1991. During a summer visit in the village the following year I watched a full and unedited video-recording of the celebration of 1992. There were no obvious or significant deviations from the schedule I had personally been part of the two previous years, but we should keep in mind the "revolution" of letting unmarried women in, beginning in 1990, and the improvisations and alterations which the celebration patterns have undergone (cf. Berggreen 1995). The celebration, nevertheless, is hard to maintain, with the possible exception of the evening gathering when friends and relatives come up from the district capital of Salonika and the town Serres. The population of the village is aging. There are few children for the husbands to look after on the women's day, and the most active women in the day celebration had matured into grandmothers. Instead of being a village celebration, formal organizations had adapted the custom to secure its continuation. The organizers of the

"Gynaecocracy" of Monoklissiá were members of a political women's organization giving priorities to women's rights, whereas in the neighbouring village of Ano Kamilla female members of the historical association were the organizers of "The Midwife's Day", thus stressing tradition.

Some attention has been paid to such celebrations, mostly by men who have been barred from direct participation. Uno Harva (1944) wrote an article on "societies of married women with their attached inauguration rituals" demonstrating a vast amount of evidence of such closed societies of married women with recurring annual celebrations, including written records tracing the custom back to the 16th century. I read this article with renewed interest after having taken part in the women's festival in Monoklissiá. Harva refers especially to conditions in Germany and East European regions, from which I am led to suspect that the celebration of Greek women has a connection with corresponding celebrations among (Bulgarian) Slavs, and that the subject ought to be approached from such a point of view as an alternative to seeking direct connections with antiquity which is a popular suggestion.

The women's right to an annual celebration, usually held in a tavern, has often been explained by the people themselves in the same way as legendary myths with origins lost in darkness, writes Harva (1944:279). The ingredients of the annual festival he describes consist of a procession, transgressions of boundaries of decency, and the prohibition of men's participation, even of their simply making an appearance, for "if women got hold of a fellow, they undressed him, removing his hat, coat or boots, which should later be returned through ransom either in cash or some bottles of wine".³

Now there was also a more serious purpose attached to the celebrations, namely to set up courts to judge women who failed to keep the accepted standards of the village. A well-regarded woman held the chair, and through her guidance sentence was passed on women who did not keep appropriate standards of cleanliness, or failed to discipline her children properly (Harva 1944:279).⁴ They all had to pledge secrecy. A woman who did not restrain herself

but told the secrets of the initiated or consecrated, "must sit with her winemug in the chimney corner, or suffer worse punishments still". It should perhaps be added that social exclusion or ostracism (being "sent to Coventry") was the most severe punishment in traditional societies.

Harva's reconstructed society of married women is built upon elements from many areas and sources where there are variations both regarding the date and the details of the observation of the day. The purpose of the societies, however, seems obvious: To affirm and strengthen their community throughout the annual cycle of work, struggle and conflicts with an unbridled celebration, but also to create a closed circle of initiated and married women versus the unmarried and uninitiated. "Not even the old spinsters – those who were over 25 years old were seen worthy of being partakers of these mysteries", whereas those who had married since the last celebration were admitted into the society of the married women. They had to go through an initiation ritual. New initiates should bring gifts to those who were more established and pay them respect. Thereafter the newcomers were acclaimed with a hurrah. They were thrown thrice up into the air and wished childluck and prosperity. Now they were admitted into the wives' league.

Harva writes about a suggestion that the origins of the right the women had once a year to be "made the equals of men (...) were a faded memory of the Germanic woman's past prominent position in society..." He then adds: "There is, however, to be noticed that such a women's society or women's guild, as far as is known, has not taken place in the North, where traces of the ancient Germanic popular culture ought to have been better kept than at other locations" (p. 280).

So Harva thinks that such festivals may be traces of an ancient Germanic culture in which the position of women traditionally was strong, and he had expected to find such traces in the North. He does not, but he finds to his surprise a similar tradition among the mordvines of Russia.

What does not fit in well with Harva's perspectives, fits remarkably well into the position

of present day researchers. When women in the Monoklissiá hurly-burly made fun of the men's ways and styles, some would claim that this belongs to the category of customs that make fun of one's superiors.

Researchers who work with such rituals of reversion, in which the normal world is topsy turvy, interpret them as outlets of energies that might otherwise become dangerously explosive. In a paradigm that views women as suppressed, this may be a viable interpretation. An alternative interpretation, however, is that these rituals are a means for women to strengthen their mutual ties and to set up continued standards for future village life. My central argument is that married women have had a kind of guild – the word league should also be suggested – and an annual court of justice, all being focused through one annual day of celebrations, rituals and togetherness.⁵ If we take for granted that such rituals are expressions of inequality and power hierarchies, shall the absence of such customs suggest some degree of equality and mutual respect between the sexes?

Norwegian folk life

In order to get closer to a conclusion, we move back to Norway and the issue of standard-setting among married women. For illumination of the subject it may be worthwhile to read the school-teacher K.L. Huus's complaints about (western) Norwegian women in 1872:

"She commands the household's economy according to the old custom that has conveyed this right to her. She manages the family's property where management is important to live well and happily, and not only in the living room, but in kitchen, cellar, barn and animal buildings almost everything is placed under her direction, as nobody stands in that order in the family that they may surpass her or keep any kind of control with her and her management" (Huus 1872:4).

This particular school-teacher was eager to enact reforms, and to please contemporary civil authorities and he wrote with disgust about the strong women, and men who were powerless in

their relations with their wives. He gave evidence of powerful and headstrong women who did not tolerate interference from their husbands in domestic affairs. "Throughout the 19th century men were supported by strong ideologies in the belief that they had more wits than women and the right to take precedence over them in decision make-up. This attitude occurred first in the upper classes. We see through the autobiography of Gustava Kielland (born in 1800) how she struggles to bend her awe under the strong correction and admonishments of her husband, the theologian and priest Gabriel. (She is renowned because she started the first women's missionary society.) In his history of the Norwegian (state) church, Heggtoveit (1905:119) mentions a lay preacher in southwest Norway, who was active in the mid 1800s:

"Both by the clergy and the parishioners he was generally held in high esteem, it was said, however, that he to some extent lived in a less harmonious relationship with his wife, without it being easy to decide who bore the real guilt. There is the possibility that he was somewhat strict with her, too particular in trifles and somewhat authoritative as he demanded unconditioned obedience and submission in all matters, and she did not always put up with this. This caused struggle and a tense relationship between them."

There is certainly much to be read between the lines in this quote, which presents an image of militant and very conservative men of the clergy in the history of the Norwegian church during the 19th century. Such men were to be found in most sectors. By and by women accepted the new doctrines and "took to their senses", but as we may learn from Huus (1872), the males within the peasantry in west Norway were still subjugated by self-willed women who accepted no interference, that is of course within the women's own fields of authority.

Does this imply that because Nordic women have not had a role reversal festival as the Greek and Slavic women have, they have not felt a need to give vent to suppressed feelings accumulated during the year? The question must be left open. There are, however, indica-

tions of married women's authority and forums for its maintenance within the structure of the so-called "old peasant society".

The key power – "Schlüsselgewalt"

Huus (1872) wrote about women's authority over the economic affairs of the household according to "an old custom" that had entitled her to this right. He says nothing about the nature of this old custom. It may be connected with the old law term *Schlüsselgewalt*: the rightful authority of one spouse to step in for the other in matters concerning the household.⁷ This German word *Schlüsselgewalt* covers what in Swedish is named as a wife's disposal over *lås och nyckel*: "lock and key". The Danish scholar Inger Dübeck (1978:106) has dealt with this phenomenon in her juridical dissertation. With regard to the well-being of family and kin, and to general business management as well, it was important that a wife be able to carry out juridical acts in favour of the general housekeeping. Gunvor Trætteberg (1951) has also written about the key power of women in traditional Norway, and explains: The women in Hordaland (a county in west Norway) carried in former days a set of artifacts in their belts. "From a silver brooch hung knife, keys and needlecase in long ribbons" (Trætteberg 1951:41).

Trætteberg knew 25 such brooches from Hordaland, and in addition she knew some from *samé* areas.⁸ A vicar and folk life researcher wrote as early as 1774 that the custom was beginning to decline. Townswomen had stopped wearing the "belt-sets" (*beltesaker*) around 1700. Approximately 100 years later the custom began to decline among country women.

What in legal terms are mere words, become concrete material in Trætteberg's study. She also refers to the *Schlüsselrecht* of women. But she stresses the keys as a *symbol*, and puts little stress upon the authority that went along with having full administrative authority over silver cabinets and flatware chests, linen and provisions. There were many keys to be in charge of. In the dowry alone there should be at least three keys: for a clothes-chest and for two chests of bed-clothes. It was a relief to distribute the keys with three at each side, she comments,

with reference to a picture of a sculpture, showing a woman from Fana near Bergen."

This custom of wearing keys and other belt artifacts vanished at approximately the same time as a cultural transformation took place from around 1830, with a regression in women's (informal) rights. Holga Hernes discusses the political theories predominant among 18th century philosophers, and applies them to an explanation of why women fared so badly in the new nation states as these were established. In Norway the "intellectual and cultural" position of women was "seriously sapped" from ca 1820–30, when higher education was institutionalized and formalized. As late as 1832 the first law was passed that explicitly denied women the right to vote at elections, a right that was finally granted them in 1913 (Hernes 1982:21f).

Through the biography of Camilla Collett (1813–1896), the most prominent of women's rights activists throughout the 19th century, one gets the impression confirmed that there was a tightening of women's sphere after the rather liberal 18th century, when Camilla's mother and aunts had led a freer life when they were young. The curtains were drawn in the "dolls houses". Now began "the epoch of the lonely housewife", to use Börje Hanssen's words. Berndt Gustafsson (1956:161) has discussed the discrepancy between ideal and reality where reality was the woman "holding a dominating position within her own domestic sphere, a position which was undermined by industrialization and the decay of personal housekeeping. Ideologically, she was subordinate to man, but, in reality, she was in many things his equal".

Natural law as a universal principle made obsolete all regional laws and conceptions of justice, and with reference to women, natural law decreed that it was "natural" that men were her superiors. This conception was so strong during the 19th century that when lawyers then and later were confronted with the strength and authority that women were granted through the *Schlüsselgewalt*, they did not, or would not believe it, and interpreted the laws in women's disfavour.¹⁰

A guild model for women's community

I began by referring to popular culture and its suggestions that a wife and mother was an authoritative figure, respected and even feared by spouse and offspring. Next I referred to the annual celebration of the married wives' day off throughout (especially) Eastern and Middle Europe. Then I suggested that the lack of such a celebration in the North rather affirms the strong position of women than contradicts it. Finally I pointed at the conspicuous use of belt keys through a custom that finally disappeared around 1840. I also point to the social, economic processes that led to a total cultural change after ca 1830.

Gudmund Sandvik (1878) used the word *konevelde* - "wife's power" with reference to a stipulation found in medieval Borgarting law. It concerns the situation in which a husband has so strong a "wife's power" over him that she will not bend to his will. The actual case given stated that when he says that she shall remove their child from her breast after she has nursed it through two lents and into the third, she refuses. He then is subjected to *konevelde* according to the law. Now, there must be some authority to support a woman who resists her husband, some consensus among women about a reasonable length of nursing time.

I bring this matter in here to link the communities of married women to women's authority and management over birth and child rearing, and also to suggest a view of married women as a professional group and a judicial authority in issues that touch upon women's affairs.

I suggest the guild as a *model* for the societies of married women. When laws are unwritten they are subject to change in a more flexible way than when statutes are proclaimed in paragraphs and signed by the members of a group. They are nonetheless prerogatives, often as authoritative as formal laws. Unwritten codes are more difficult to relate to because even leadership may be subtle and pursued collectively by the demizens – those who set the standards of local good taste. I shall only suggest the analogy with formal guilds, referring to evidence that ordinary guilds have been within the reach of women. Angeliki Laiou (1986) writes

in her article "The festival of 'Agathe'" about women's guilds in Byzantine Constantinople. The guilds were made up by cloth makers, spinners, weavers and wool carders, all honorable professions for women. During an annual festival in May, besides the celebration itself, there were older women to preside over the younger. The former had the authority to punish those who had not kept standards of expected quality. At the arsenal in Venice during late Middle Ages and early Renaissance (13th–15th century), there was a craftsmen's guild of sail-makers made up entirely by women (Lane 1934, Berggreen 1973).

Granted that giving birth is a matter for the married woman only, one may see how both individual "workshops" (i.e. households) and "guilds" (i.e. the community of married women) are upset and disturbed by non-guild productions. Jonas Frykman (1977) has analyzed reactions against the "whores" of rural society, mainly in rural Scania. Through the position of "whores" one may gain some understanding for the "cruel" stands taken by collectives of married women towards extra-marital pregnancies. I take the point of view that the community of wives as a body were bound together by loyalty to household standards and codes of social (and sexual) behaviour. As mistresses of the housewives' craft they could not tolerate dabblers or anything else that would upset the order in their houses, or their reputation as housekeepers. They have had their housewives' honour and pride, their *husmorære*, to keep and defend.

Notes

This study is part of an ongoing research project titled "The use and abuse of heroines" dealing with women in Greek and Norwegian national identity building. A first draft of this paper was read at the international conference "Rethinking Self and Society: Subjectivity, Gender and Identity. Centre for Feminist Research in the Humanities/Centre for the Study of European Civilization, University of Bergen June 1–2, 1993. I thank professor Electa Arenal for her meticulous reading of my paper, hoping that she will find this version a loyal follow up, and an improvement.

1. The Scandinavian "ä" is pronounced as "au" in Paul.
2. This is known both from the writings and oral information of the dress historian Ågot Noss. Angeliki Hatzimichali (1978) has written about corresponding differentiations in Greek folk costume customs. Worst of all was the plight of the unmarried woman who had to wear a hood or some other indication of her shame. Some will remember Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The scarlet letter* where the heroine of the novel was forced by her community to wear an "A" for adultery.
3. Harva refers to Albert Becker: *Frauenrechtliches in Brauch und Sitte*. Programm des K. Human. Gymnasiums Zweibrücken 1912/13.
4. Harva's reference is Albert Becker: *Frauenrecht in Brauch und Sitte, Zur Geschichte des Weibens bei Speyer*. (Hess. Blätter für Volkskunde X, 1911.
5. A good participant study of the January 8th women's day is Déde (1976). Her view is that the celebration belongs to a fertility rite, focusing on the midwife. Professor of folklore Loukatos 1977 has reported on her article and several others which deal with the same celebrations. He has noticed that the day is the festival day of the female saint Dominique, and that there is a large monastery named for the saint near Constantinople (Istanbul). With regard to Monoklissia, the church is left out entirely and has no part in the celebration.
6. I have interpreted this issue in many articles and works, most recently in Berggreen 1989 and 1990. Professor Ida Blom, Bergen, also refers frequently to Huus, who wrote "On Woman" in 1872, as his entry in a competition on how to improve female household standards, for which he won first prize.
7. My translation from Duden's *Deutsches Universal Wörterbuch* 1983. The original text reads: "Befugnis des einen Ehepartners den andere in Dingen, die die Haushaltsführung betreffen, mit rechtlicher Wirkung zu vertreten."

8. Her study is rather widely scoped, covering etymology, artifact shapes and their distribution from Asia to Norway.
9. From Nordmandsdalen, Fredensborg Palace, North Zealand, Denmark. The sculptures are from around 1770.
10. Law historian Hilde Sandvik, University of Oslo, oral information. Her findings are parallel to those of Mary Beard (1973) who demonstrated how the influential jurist Blackwell's interpretations of English laws and statutes came to weaken the judicial position of women to such a degree, that they were eliminated as judicial persons and subjugated to men. Discussions of these issues are ongoing and evidence is continuously presented and (re)interpreted.

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