

Gender, Power and Honour

Child Murder in Premodern Sweden

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Annika Larsdotter and Karin Hansdotter were two of thousands of young, unmarried Swedish women in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who were charged with child murder or abortion, and who usually were condemned to death. The general questions discussed in the article are: Why did the women murder their children? What was the role of the man, the father of the child? Ultimately, child murder is about gender, power and sexuality, and it is interpreted by the author within the framework of the gender power structures of the patriarchal society as they were represented in the institution of the household. The author is able to show that child murder was more closely associated with men's honour than with women's, regardless of whether the father of the child was married or unmarried. It was the man who had had illicit intercourse with the woman who drove the woman to kill the child, by threats and denials.

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Child Murder

In much of Western Europe right from the end of the sixteenth century until well into the nineteenth century, the state and the church were heavily involved in combating child murder, which was regarded as one of the greatest social problems of the time. In Sweden, as in many other countries, the increase in the number of child murders led to special legislation at an early stage. The “new” crime of child murder, which also included abortion, was essentially different from previously known killings of children, such as exposure or accidental death caused by one or both parents. The new crime of child murder consisted of a newborn child being killed by the *mother* at birth after she had kept the pregnancy and the delivery secret. The law also presupposed that the child was illegitimate, that is, that it had been born of an unlawful sexual liaison.

Like other forms of homicide, child murder carried the death penalty, but it differed from them in that *presumption* was sufficient: if cer-

tain criteria were fulfilled, a suspect could be condemned on circumstantial evidence alone. If the woman had concealed her pregnancy and given birth in secret, this was enough for her to be condemned for murder, unless she could prove that the child was stillborn. And this she could not do, since there were no witnesses to the birth.

It was almost exclusively young, unmarried women who were accused and convicted of child murder. Married women were presumed not to give birth to illegitimate children or to have abortions, and when this did happen it was of course easier to conceal the crime under the protection of marriage. In the way the law was designed, men could not be guilty of child murder. A man who was singled out as the father of the murdered child could, however, be condemned for committing fornication or adultery in contravention of other laws. It was not until 1750 that an amendment to the section on child murder in the law of 1734 ruled on punishment for complicity in murder. What the legislators had in mind was probably not the father of the child as an

accessory to the murder, but women associated with the mother who had killed her child.

Neither legal nor ecclesiastical texts treat the child as a crime victim or consider its rights. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, however, child murder began to be discussed in other contexts – humanitarian and demographic – in the spirit of the Enlightenment, and the battle against child murder was also part of society’s war against infant mortality. It thus seems as if it was not primarily the murder of the child that was felt to be most frightening, but the “dissolute” women. The legislation thus became an instrument not just in the struggle against child murder but also in the control of women’s sexuality.

There has been surprisingly little research on the new child murder, and when it has occurred it has been in connection with studies of extramarital fertility, in “illegitimacy studies”. Here it is found that the proportion of unmarried mothers who killed their children was very small, and the crime is considered to have been a consequence of the shame and loss of honour associated with being an unmarried mother. Economic and social factors, the fact that the accused women mostly came from the poorest strata in society and thus could not support a child, have also been adduced as explanations for the crime (see references in Lövkrona 1999b).

Research hitherto has been predominantly quantitative, and the problem has been disciplined in tables, diagrams and maps of regional and chronological variations in sexual morality and immorality. This research usually does not problematize gender, and the concept of illegitimacy actually conceals gender. Researchers have “forgotten” the fact that a birth was preceded by a sexual act by both a man and a woman. The man’s role in the child murder has been ignored except in terms of paternity. No one has asked questions such as: How did the sexual act come about? On whose initiative? Was the father married or unmarried? In what way did the man involved influence the woman to murder her baby? Poverty and shame, the most common explanations for child murder, refer only to the woman’s situation and ignore the male party.

The sexual act that preceded a child murder took place in a patriarchal society where women were subordinate to men, with less power and lower status. Ultimately, child murder is about gender, power and sexuality and can therefore only be understood within the framework of the patriarchal society’s gender power structures. Gender relations in this society are therefore of great significance for our understanding of child murder. This is my starting point in the search for answers to the question why young, unmarried women murdered their children instead of taking on the role of unmarried mother. It has therefore been natural to refer to gender theories which problematize the relationship between gender and power. The text is based on my monograph *Annika Larsdotter; barnamörderska. Kön, makt och sexualitet i 1700-talets Sverige* (1999b).

Annika Larsdotter and Karin Hansdotter

Annika Larsdotter and Karin Hansdotter are two of the thousands of young, unmarried Swedish women – and tens of thousands of Western European women – who were accused of child murder or abortion in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were normally sentenced to death. They are two of the eight women from the period 1729–1776, all from the province of Västergötland in southwest Sweden, who are analysed in my book. The two cases differ as regards the civil status of the men involved: the father in Annika’s case is a married man, in Karin’s case unmarried. It is uncertain how common either of these constellations was, but I would be bold enough to claim that the cases of Annika and Karin are fairly typical in Sweden in the eighteenth century. The following reconstruction of the crime proceeds from the trials in the district court and the “narratives” about the event constructed there by the involved parties, by the accused and the witnesses (cf. Lövkrona 1999b:31–47 for methods of text analysis).

Annika Larsdotter and Gunnar Jonsson. Annika Larsdotter was 18 years old when she was tried for child murder by the district court in Ås

in June and July 1765. The father of the child was her brother-in-law, Gunnar Jonsson, aged 25, married to Annika's eldest sister Maria. Annika lived and worked on her parents' farm, where her sister and brother-in-law had their own household and a piece of land of their own. This is what had happened:

In summer 1764 Gunnar Jonsson had tried to start a liaison with Annika, who repeatedly repulsed him. One day when they had been working together in the field, Gunnar chased her and finally caught her as she sat eating nuts on a heap of stones. Annika tried to defend herself but failed, and Gunnar was finally able to have his way. They continued to meet in secret during the autumn, and we do not know how much force Gunnar now used, or whether Annika gave in voluntarily. When Annika realized after a while that she was pregnant, she told Gunnar, who forbade her to say anything to her parents and urged her to blame someone else if it became known. Annika told the court that Gunnar had also told her to kill the child and instructed her how to do so, but he denied this. Annika concealed her pregnancy, and replied to her parents' persistent questions that she had contracted dropsy, which would explain her growing stomach. Her mother examined Annika at her father's request but said that she could find no signs of pregnancy. Rumours soon began to spread around the village, and some neighbour women visited Annika's mother to find out what was happening. The mother explained that Annika was sick, but she let the women milk her breasts. They found no milk and therefore could not determine whether Annika was pregnant, according to their statements in court. Annika still stubbornly denied that she was pregnant. The vicar of the parish also took action when he heard the rumours, but he was not able to obtain a clear picture either.

Annika gave birth to her child alone late one evening in the barn, and no one in the house noticed anything, they said. In the morning the parents understood what had happened, since Annika was bleeding, and they forced her to admit that she had given birth. Annika confessed but said that the child was stillborn and that she had hidden it in the barn. Her father, who was a juror and thus a semi-public person

in the parish, called the local policeman and the child was taken from its hiding place in the presence of witnesses. Annika said that she had suffocated the child by holding her hand over its mouth. Gunnar Jonsson ran away to Norway when it became clear that Annika had killed the baby. He returned voluntarily after a while and acknowledged his paternity, but he denied any involvement in the murder of the child. Gunnar was sentenced to two years' imprisonment, a whipping, and compulsory shaming in church for adultery and incest, and for having evaded justice. Annika was sentenced to death and executed. Gunnar survived his spell in prison, if he actually served it at all. He and Maria had five more children, the first one just a year after Annika's execution.

Karin Hansdotter and Lars Andersson. Karin Hansdotter was 25 years old and worked as a maid for the unmarried farmhand Lars Andersson, whom she pointed out as the father of the child. They had taken a liking to each other, and as soon as it was known that Karin was pregnant they became engaged. After a while Lars began to doubt that he was father of the child. He thought that Karin grew fat far too soon, and he had heard rumours that she had previously been with another farmhand on the farm. Karin tried to provoke an abortion with the aid of arsenic, which she said was at Lars's request; if she did away with the child, he would marry her anyway, he had promised. The attempted abortion failed, and Karin gave birth to her child about two months too early for it to have been Lars Andersson's child. She claimed that the child was born prematurely, but the women in the house said that this was probably not the case. Lars threatened to send for a midwife from the nearby town to determine the age of the child. Karin then killed her baby, in order to be able to marry Lars as he had promised, she said in court. She suffocated the child (after an unsuccessful attempt with arsenic) and claimed that it had died in its sleep. People in the household expressed their suspicions to the vicar, who saw to it that an investigation was conducted, and Karin finally admitted that Lars Andersson was not the father of the child and that she had killed it. Karin was executed where-

as Lars Andersson was fully acquitted, even of the crime of premature intercourse (referring to the conception of a child before the formal contract of marriage).

What was it that impelled the women to commit the grave crime of killing their children? They were not mentally ill or feeble-minded or in any other way “abnormal”. Nor were they on the margins of society. They belonged to functioning social contexts. Annika’s father was tenant of a crown farm, admittedly a relatively small one, but sufficient to provide for a family of five children and a son-in-law. We are not told anything about Karin’s background. The fact that she served as a maid need not mean that she came from a landless family. It was common at this time for the sons and daughters of peasant farmers to serve in other households before they started families of their own. Annika lived and worked with her parents, and Karin had her mother and siblings not far away from where she worked, and her mother helped her with the birth and care of the baby. Neither Annika nor Karin had been punished for any previous immorality, and neither of the two women stated that they had murdered the babies to avoid the shame of being an unmarried mother. This does not mean that shame and dishonour did not influence their actions, but my thesis is that the causal connection between a woman’s honour and the murder of a child is not as simple as has been asserted in previous research. Child murder, in my view, is more closely associated with men’s honour than with women’s.

In these two cases, the fathers of the children actively tried to get out of the situation that had arisen, one which could have serious social and moral consequences for them as well. Both Annika and Karin stated that they had been threatened and urged by the fathers to kill the children. In addition, Annika had been forced by her brother-in-law to have intercourse. It is these two facts which I have seized on in my analysis, and which I believe were of crucial significance for the women’s decision to murder the child.

Household, Gender and Position

Child murder took place in a household context

in which the child was conceived nine months before the murder, and the involved parties often came from the same household. The household constituted the basis of social and political order in premodern society. An individual was born into a household and then lived all his or her life in a household – but not the same household. It was in the household that women and men had their fundamental social experience, and this was where they constituted their identity as man and woman.

A household, however, was not a gender-neutral institution where women and men acted on the same conditions and had the same or similar power, value and influence. The premodern family, which was the basis of the household, was a relationship between a man and a woman institutionalized by society, and was as such an expression of a historically specific gender relation that was hierarchal, with male superiority and female subordination. This male-dominated gender order was manifested in the legislation and in social and cultural practices and discourses.

Conceptions of femininity, masculinity and relations of power between them influenced people’s everyday reality and created meaning in it. These processes, however, must be studied from the perspective of the individual and of the household. The concept of position may be used here as an analytical tool alongside gender. Gender, writes the philosopher Linda Alcoff, from whom I have borrowed the concept of position, may be regarded as a subject position determined by behaviour, characteristics, habits, practices and discourses. It is also part of a network of relations and incorporated in the structural framework of a society, which is historically changeable (Alcoff 1988; Lövkrona 1996, 1999b). Position thereby includes both structures and actors, and allows us to interpret the thoughts, feelings, actions, strategies, choices and considerations of the involved parties.

During their life cycle, women and men in premodern society had predetermined positions in the household based on gender and civil status. A married man was master of the household, husband and father; a married woman was mistress of the household, wife and mother; an unmarried man was son and farmhand, and

an unmarried woman was daughter and maid. These may be viewed as subject positions, with which women and men identified and on the basis of which they understood themselves and the world around them.

The positions were defined differently for women and men, for married and unmarried individuals, and they gave different access to power. The preconditions for the individual's freedom of action, right of determination, influence and opportunities in premodern society were thus dependent on gender and civil status. To capture the power structure of the positions we can make an analytical distinction between *social* power and *gender* power. Social power refers to the power that men and women had by virtue of the patriarchally institutionalized aspect of the position; gender power means the power emanating from the gender order. The two power structures together formed the *positional* power that was constitutive in a position and that dictated the framework for the individual's conditions in the household – and in society. Positional power defined power relations not only between men and women but also between men and men and between women and women. The construction of masculinity and femininity in premodern society differed in many ways from that of modern society. The hierarchy with male superiority and female subordination was the same, although justified by different reasons (cf. Lövkrona 1999a).

The position with the greatest power – both social power and gender power – was that of the master of the household/husband/father. The married man's gender power, which lay in the construction of masculinity, gave him preferential right of interpretation and ascribed a higher general value to male pursuits, properties, and so on than to female ones (Lövkrona 2001:136ff.). Social power gave legitimacy to the superiority. Married women received derivative social power from their husbands and masters, and it was through marriage that a woman had her status in society and access to power. The married woman's gender power was determined by her honour, her reproductive ability, her capacity for work as mistress of the household, and also by her specific knowledge of the female body and the women's world. The construction of feminin-

ity in pre-industrial society centred on work, reproduction and sexuality. The married woman's positional power above all gave her authority over the young, unmarried women and was used to supervise their behaviour with (young) men; she was responsible for the direct control of sexual morality, while the formal, statutory control lay with the man.

The position with the least power in the household – and in society – was that of the young woman, in her capacity as both daughter and maid. She was not just institutionally subordinate to her parents and/or the master and mistress; she was also without any gender power. Her reputation as an honourable woman was, as we shall see, not only dependent on her own behaviour but also on the man assuming his responsibility for a sexual liaison. The unmarried man's social power was relatively insignificant, but unlike the unmarried woman, he had access to gender power by being a man in a hierarchical gender order.

This model has guided me in my analysis: Annika and Karin acted in the position of unmarried woman/daughter/maid; Gunnar Jons-son, who made Annika pregnant, acted in the position of married man/master, while Lars Andersson, betrothed to Karin, was in the position of unmarried man/farmhand.

Coercion and Threats

To understand why Annika and Karin murdered their children, the course of events must be analysed starting with the sexual act and leading to the murder. In the case of Annika Larsdotter, the murder was the final point in a long series of circumstances that started with her being exposed to sexual coercion, followed by threats from Gunnar and her denial that she was pregnant until she gave birth to the child in secret and killed it. In Karin's case the relationship with Lars started voluntarily and was followed in the traditional way by a betrothal. The pregnancy, and the birth, were public knowledge in the community. The betrothal did not end in marriage but in tragedy because of the fiancé's suspicion that he was not the father of the child. Karin was also threatened by the real father of the child, according to her own testimony.

Coercion and threats by men against the young woman to have intercourse with her and make her keep quiet or try to persuade her to blame someone else are not uncommon features of the child murders. Did things really happen in this way, and can we trust the women's statements, or were the accusations against the man just a way to try to evade responsibility? It does happen that men admit to having forced or threatened the women, but in most cases they deny all involvement with her. In cases where a man is shown to be the father he always denies accusations of coercion and threats.

In the case of Annika Larsdotter there is no doubt that the first intercourse took place after compulsion (although perhaps not with physical violence), what in modern feminist terminology would be called "coercive sex". Gunnar also admitted that he had chased her round the field beforehand, finally catching her and having his way with her, despite her protests. In other comparable cases there are not such clear statements about coercion, but the laconic wording of the court records suggests that the woman at least tried to ward off the man's approaches. It is also clear that the man took the initiative, as other studies corroborate (see Lindstedt Cronberg 1997; Telste 1993, 1999). A relationship with a married man could not possibly lead to marriage, and from this point of view the women's statements about having been forced to have intercourse are plausible. Why would they voluntarily let themselves into a situation which could only end badly for them? This does not rule out the possibility that there may have been some attraction between the woman and the married man, but this does not mean that the woman was willing to have intercourse.

Why did Gunnar – and the other men – not respect the woman's "no"? Here I believe that they interpreted the situation in accordance with the available construction of masculinity as regards sexuality. This was communicated in the oral sexual discourses of premodern society, such as erotic folklore, which probably had a great impact – with the aid of humour (Lövkrona 1993, 1996). Masculinity is portrayed here in terms of seduction, virility, potency and "the right to take what you want", even against a woman's express will. In these narratives, a

man can use cunning and trickery to entice a young, sexually inexperienced woman to have sex with him, and be sure that she will be satisfied and grateful – she just did not know that she wanted it. A man who fails to seduce a maid, or who lets her take command, is depicted as ridiculous and unmanly. A man whose wife cheats on him with the farmhand is mocked and called a cuckold; he is not master of his house and his wife, and he fails to live up to the expected ideal of masculinity. This masculinity is matched in the folklore by a construction of femininity in which young women are portrayed as willing, longing, expectant virgins with a powerful sexual drive. They allow themselves to be seduced without reacting because their resistance is not respected. These representations of femininity ran counter to the norm that young women were only expected to yield to man after a promise of marriage. They were also in conflict with the law which dictated harsh penalties for any extramarital liaison – for both parties.

The married men in the cases of child murder acted in virtue of their positional power when they forced themselves on the women. The construction of masculinity – gender power – "gave" men the right to use women against their will, and the social power made this possible, albeit not legal. In this specific situation they highlighted meanings of gender which legitimated their action. It is, moreover, obvious that the construction of female sexuality did not serve as a model for the actions of the unmarried women – they did not yield. On the other hand, it may have influenced them to place the guilt on themselves for not having put up more resistance or not being able to withstand the men's "courtship". Was it the case after all that she had enticed the man and behaved seductively? And hadn't she felt desire? The law on rape rules that a woman must be able to prove that she defended herself, and she has to be half beaten to death in order to win a rape case. Otherwise she is said to have been willing – a view that still influences legal usage today (Andersson 2001).

Unmarried people who had illicit sex leading to pregnancy were expected to make the relationship legitimate, and Karin's case is an example of this. The parties paid fines and then

the matter was over and done with. In 1653 the death penalty ceased to be applied to the married party in “single adultery” (in which only one of the parties was married), but it was retained for “double adultery” (when both parties were married). Single adultery was most common and the law of 1734 stipulated fines as the penalty – 80 dalers for the married party and 40 for the unmarried one. Married men nevertheless took the risk of committing adultery, as statistics show, more often than married women (Lindstedt Cronberg 1977:105). This can be explained by the sexual practice and the discourses defining the male position. To begin with, there was the view generally prevailing, at least among men, that they had a right to sexual intercourse with other (unmarried) women when their own wives were unavailable. If misfortune struck and the woman became pregnant, they could either deny involvement or pay another man to assume paternity. Folk morality was more permissive when it came to a married man’s infidelity than a married woman’s. It was correspondingly more permissible for an unmarried man to have premarital relations even if this was not intended to lead to marriage.

By virtue of their positional power, married men could silence gossip inside and outside the household. None of the members of the household dared to act to help the woman, and during her pregnancy they pretended not to have heard, seen or known anything. Annika’s case is somewhat different in this respect, since Gunnar was not her master. Instead it was Annika’s father and mother who acted in their capacity as master and mistress. The parents of course cannot have failed to know that their daughter was pregnant, as they claimed in court, but they hushed up what was happening in the family, not to assist in the murder of a child but to solve the problem inside the family without the outside world finding out the truth. Presumably they thought that the rumours would die down through time.

The wives of the accused married men reacted in slightly different ways. Some did not want to help at all to conceal what had happened, but threats forced them to remain silent; one wife was compelled to assist with the birth and hide the baby. Others tried to protect and defend

their husbands – either by pretending to be completely ignorant or by accusing the young woman of lying and implying that she was licentious. Annika’s sister Maria, who was married to Gunnar, said that she had heard and seen nothing and declared that Gunnar had always been loving towards her.

The relative positional power of the married women restricted their scope for action, and it was on this basis that they shaped their strategies *vis-à-vis* the husband. They defended him while simultaneously casting suspicion on the young women, whom they could control with the aid of the same power. Annika’s mother examined her daughter’s body and breasts, and she also let neighbour women do the same, in her capacity as an honest wife. Breast milking was an authorized way to establish whether an unmarried woman was pregnant or had given birth.

To sum up, married men exercised varying degrees of coercion when “seducing” unmarried women. An unmarried woman had little chance of openly accusing her master of making sexual advances. The cultural construction of female sexuality meant that she herself bore the guilt: it was she who had tempted and enticed him and made herself available to him. Whatever the circumstances, a married man would deny any dealings with her. Why Annika did not dare or want to report her brother-in-law’s approaches is not hard to understand. She not only feared his anger and his denials, but also her parents’ and her sister’s accusations of having let herself be led astray. Annika knew that she had not lived up to what was expected of her as an honest woman and had not resisted her brother-in-law’s “courting”. Her supposed weakness had brought dishonour not only on herself but also on the two families.

The Unmarried Mother

When Annika realized that she was pregnant, she was faced with the choice of telling her parents about her condition or obeying Gunnar’s order to do away with the child. She consistently and stubbornly denied that she was pregnant and refused to let herself be moved by her parents, her sister, or anyone else in the community. Annika rejected what we today regard as the

only possible alternative, the one that was also expected of her by people back then, namely, to have the child and accept her punishment and her role as an unmarried mother.

What did it mean for a woman to have a child outside marriage? Unmarried mothers were not an uncommon phenomenon at the time, even if it was not a desirable state. Until the mid-eighteenth century, extramarital births accounted for only a few per cent of all births, but the figure then rose sharply, with the result that Sweden had the highest percentage in Western Europe in the nineteenth century. The penalty for having an illegitimate child was a fine and public penance in church, whereby the sinner was “forgiven” by the church and the community. Until she had done this penance, she was barred from communion. If she later married, a woman who had had an illegitimate child was not allowed to wear the bridal crown at the wedding; this was a public display of her deviant status. It was these ecclesiastical punishments which the more far-sighted politicians of the time, who wanted to abolish the death penalty, felt to be so shameful for the woman that she preferred to murder the child than bear the humiliation. The secular penalty was a fine, but if she could not pay she was birched or had to run the gauntlet (Lindstedt Cronberg 1997:112f.).

Not only was the unmarried mother punished by the authorities; she also had to endure various forms of special treatment by the community. There is evidence that unmarried mothers were stigmatized and harassed because it was believed that they could inflict diseases on children; rickets, for instance, was called *horeskäver*, literally “whore’s shingles”). An unmarried mother therefore had to wear a special headdress so that everyone could recognize her and take the necessary precautions. She was culturally constructed as a danger to the married women and was therefore expelled from the women’s collective. No one would marry a woman like this, and she usually ended up as a single mother on the margins of society, with several illegitimate children (Frykman 1977).

This one-sidedly negative image of the conditions of the unmarried mother in premodern society has been partly refuted by other re-

searchers. It has been found, for example, that most unmarried mothers got married through time, either to the father of the child or to another man, which suggests that they were not always rejected because of an illegitimate child (Håkansson 1998:79f.). Nor were they excluded from the female community; at the birth, for example, they received help from the women in the village in the traditional way. The unmarried mothers do not seem to have found any difficulty in obtaining work as maids (cf. Lindstedt Cronberg 1997; Telste 1999). Moreover, there were traditional patterns for handling a situation like this in the family and the community. It was not unusual for the women of the family to help out by looking after the daughter’s baby while she was away serving as a maid. On one occasion during her pregnancy, Annika’s father promised to take care of her and the child, which was in agreement with prevailing practice. Karin could have married the farmhand who was the father of the child, or at least demanded that he admit paternity and pay maintenance for the child (of course, he denied paternity in court). The child could also be temporarily placed with a foster family. It also happened, as we saw above, that a master who had got his maid pregnant paid a farmhand to assume paternity. Being an unmarried mother was thus a possible alternative, even if it was not desirable, in the position of a young unmarried woman. The way life turned out for an unmarried mother depended on her individual situation and how well she managed to balance between her own wishes and the expectations of the community.

Honour was one of the discourses associated with the position of an unmarried woman. Women’s honour was connected to their sexual behaviour. The talk of honour seems to have been more compelling than the real meaning of honour; honour and virtue were not identical with a maidenhead, being a virgin (Roper 1996:72, 107). It had a symbolic value but it could also be materialized – lost honour could be restored. There were two types of unmarried mothers: those with a child for which the father admitted his responsibility but preferred to pay maintenance rather than marry her. He could thereby restore the woman’s honour, at least in part.

The child was then perceived as being conceived under pledge of marriage, and for this category of women the brand of being dishonoured or violated faded away, unless she subsequently had more illegitimate children. The other category consisted of women with a child of which the father denied paternity and thereby accused the woman of being licentious. It was probably this category of unmarried mothers who gained a reputation of being immoral and could not count on marrying well (cf. Telste 1999:136, 202f.).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the wake of the Reformation, marriage increased in value as the only possible form of life (Roper 1994). For women and men alike, marrying was the most radical change in life, and it provided a person's most important identity (Gowing 1998:7). For a woman marriage, as we have seen, meant a position that gave her status and power. It was in the position of wife and mistress of the house that a woman had any relation to society and could assert herself as an individual. For these young women, the fear of not being able to marry may therefore have been a strong motive force behind the murders, stronger than the shame of becoming an unmarried mother.

Karin belonged to the category of unmarried mother with a man who admitted paternity and restored her honour. When he later became uncertain he was easily able to turn Karin into a loose woman by questioning her honesty. This gave him the right to release himself from the pledge of marriage; no one could demand that he marry a woman whose honour could be questioned. For women in Karin's situation it was the man who was able to decide whether they would be regarded as honest or not, and who thus indirectly affected their future prospects.

Gunnar finally acknowledged his paternity, but his acknowledgement did not restore Annika's honour – the two of them could not possibly legitimize their relationship. Moreover, the responsibility for the sexual act was considered to be the woman's, unless it was a clear case of rape. Annika had not accused Gunnar of rape, and he would never have been convicted for that since Annika had not put up obvious resistance. Yet another aggravating circumstance was that

Gunnar was not only a married man but also her brother-in-law. Their relationship was legally classified as incest and was punishable. The cultural assessment of incest was also negative, although it is not certain how tabooed this crime was in folk culture. The crime of incest, however, seems to have been most significant for the man's honour.

Both Annika and Karin thus ended up in the category of unmarried mothers whose honour was questioned and could not be restored. Both therefore had powerful motives for trying to avoid becoming unmarried mothers. Was this sufficient reason to murder the child?

Men's Power and Honour

Both Gunnar Jonsson and Lars Andersson denied any part in the murder of the children, and there was no evidence to show that either of them had been present when it took place. On the other hand, both Annika and Karin stated that the men had exhorted them to kill the child and threatened them. What was the man's responsibility for the murders, regardless of the truth or otherwise of the women's accusations that they had been urged and persuaded to kill the baby?

Gunnar and Lars – like the alleged fathers in other cases of child murder – used their power and tried actively to get out of the precarious situation in which they had placed themselves. I would say that they used their positional power to avoid responsibility and to save their own skins – their honour.

A woman could lose her honour by breaking sexual norms; a man could do so by breaking a wider range of social norms, of which sexuality was only one aspect. An honourable man had to meet the criteria for masculinity: honesty, uprightness, loyalty to his word and so on – a publicly defined honour (Telste 1999:144, 210, 220). Being brought to court for adultery, possibly having to suffer shaming and exclusion from communion, was a stain on a man's honour, not because he had broken sexual norms, but because he was publicly accused of a crime. Male honour was constructed in relation to other men, and it was the effects on a man's homosocial relations that were feared. This had consequenc-

es for his position in the household, his social power was weakened, and ultimately his status in society was affected. Men's and women's honour were thus not only defined differently; women's honour was of a completely different kind and measured by a completely different yardstick from man's honour (Gowing 1996).

Man's honour was a necessary condition for the legitimacy of the patriarchy and gender relations. For the same reason, women's honour was inferior to men's, of lesser significance and value. In a patriarchal society male honour is therefore more important to defend than female honour, and the women in the cases of child murder showed that they accepted this by their actions, by taking part in the spread of rumours and slanders, and by defending and submitting to their husbands. Both directly and indirectly, women were dependent on the man's social reputation not being undermined, since they were dependent on him as daughters and wives. Women therefore helped to reproduce the prevailing gender order. By killing their babies, the child murderers thus indirectly supported the logic of gender relations which made men superior and women inferior, and which placed the responsibility for sexuality on the women.

Translation: Alan Crozier

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