

Gender and Environmental Virtues: A union made in Sweden

Mark Graham
Stockholm University

Key words

community, gender, sustainability, representation, politics

Sweden enjoys a reputation as a leader in the pursuit of gender equality; it is also increasingly staking a claim as frontrunner in tackling global warming.

In this article I examine how these two ambitions have converged in claims about gender equality as a prerequisite for sustainable development, arguing that an emphasis on gender differences that underlies these claims is ambiguous and open to naturalisation. This convergence has occurred at a time when heightened levels of affect surrounding global warming co-exist with the employment of gendered metaphors to promote environmental awareness, and to sell commodities. One result has been to assign women a problematic position in the representation and tackling of environmental problems.

Turning up the heat

In Sweden, as elsewhere, recent media coverage of global warming has become increasingly emotive and urgent in tone. Vulnerability reports from Stockholm's City Council about flood risks; newspaper articles entitled 'Climate Anxieties' and 'Climate Threat' detailing the dire consequences of global warming, and warnings of an increase in insect-borne diseases and deaths from heatstroke, have all come on top of the Paris report from the



Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in February 2007, and the publicity surrounding Al Gore's film *An Uncomfortable Truth*. Concern over global warming is now virtually obligatory in Sweden. But not only are anxiety or even fear mandatory, guilt, too, is an appropriate emotional response. According to one Swedish radio commentator, 'Our guilt is on a scale unprecedented in human history': guilt at what industrialised countries have done to the planet, and guilt particularly over what this means for children and future generations.

Who is expected to feel guiltier for letting down the children than the bad mother, or grandmother, or even great-grandmother, if we adopt the long-term perspective global warming forces us to consider? (Adam 1998). A survey in October 2007 did, in fact, find that seven percent of women in Sweden were 'extremely worried' about climate changes, thirty-two percent were 'very worried', and forty percent were 'quite worried'. The corresponding figures for men were five, twenty-two, and thirty-eight percent. This is a significant difference, albeit not enormous. However, women's worries received most attention in the reporting of the results (*Dagens Nyheter* 2007 15 October, p. 9).

Men are meat eaters women are leaf eaters

Both the gendered responses to environmental concerns and the impact of gender itself on the environment and on global warming have been highlighted in recent Swedish Government reports. One of them entitled *Initial Study of Lifestyles, Consumption Patterns, Sustainable Development and Gender: Do women leave a smaller ecological footprint than men?* (Ministry of Sustainable Development 2006) makes a case for the mutual interdependence of sustainability and equality between men and women. **The report defines gender as 'a social construct that ascribes different qualities and rights to women and men regardless of individual competence or wishes' (p 6). Thus the gender differences mentioned in the report 'refer to differences resulting not from biological attributes or preferences [sic] but from gender constructs as defined above' (p 6, emphasis in original).**



Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>

This definition is somewhat unclear. What, for example, is a biological preference? Certainly, the report sees gender as a cultural construction. Yet, even as it recognises the existence of economic inequalities between men and women the report fails to consider in full their significance for gender differences in consumption and their ecological impact, especially in the case of women.

Several examples will illustrate my point. Women, the report tells us, use public transport more than men and are, therefore, responsible for lower carbon dioxide emissions. An obvious question is, what choice do they have? Maybe their husbands (if they have them) monopolise the car. Maybe they have lower salaries than men, a fact just as true in Sweden as elsewhere, and cannot afford a car. The report also points out that men eat more meat than women. An obvious issue is that many women avoid meat because they are tyrannised by demands to be slim. Yet, this explanation receives no consideration in the report. The report also notes that men in Sweden tend to buy expensive capital goods (p. 14), but this does not exclude women in a household from *using* computers or plasma televisions. The fact that women make fewer business trips by air is also cited as evidence of women's lesser impact on the environment (p. 14), but their underrepresentation among business executives is not mentioned. Women are also more likely to be the passenger in a car rather than the driver. But, does being a passenger mean they are responsible for lower carbon dioxide emissions? The report also makes some sweeping claims about the 'male role' which, it argues, is 'associated throughout the world *among other characteristics* with power and violence' (p. 16, emphasis in original), while women are more caring, and concerned with their appearance (p. 16). The report further claims that women are also more ethical in their consumer choices and give priority to the needs of the family over their own (p. 8).

Ecofeminist authors have argued that the qualities possessed by women which are supposedly beneficial for the environment are products of a patriarchal system, and may not survive outside that system (e.g. Warren 1994; Warren 1996). The ecological virtues of



Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>

women singled out in the report arise from women's subordination to men. So, although the report explicitly defines gender as a social construction, the gender differences it identifies are insufficiently related to the socio-economic inequalities that produce them. This explains the near essentialising tone of the report in which women's ecological virtues appear detached from the socio-economic context that determines them, while men's behaviour reflects unambiguously their relative socio-economic power. The result is a rather stark gender dichotomy. In this respect the report seems to reflect the Swedish situation where gender differences between men and women are often taken for granted and even essentialised as part of an argument that women can contribute their unique experiences to areas where they are currently underrepresented (Martinsson 2000). Arguably, it is the *dismantling* of gender itself that is required, given that it is gender differences that are the problem in the first place.

The green 'People's Home'

At least in its own domestic rhetoric, Sweden often considers itself to be one of the best countries, if not the best, in the world when it comes to gender equality. It now aspires to be best at environmental protection. In March 1996, the soon-to-be (and now former) Swedish Prime Minister, Göran Persson, gave a speech in which he promised that Sweden was to be a 'driving force and a forerunner in endeavours to create ecologically sustainable development' (Lundqvist 2004). In his speech Persson envisaged what he termed a 'green "People's Home"'. The phrase 'The People's Home' (*Folkhemmet*) is the name commonly given to the Swedish social-democratic welfare state. Persson's vision can be summarised as '*ecologically sustainable socioeconomic welfare through ecological modernisation*' (Lundqvist 2004, p. 1287), in which technical solutions meet the challenges posed by global warming without radical changes in behaviour. It is a comfortable vision for Swedes who

are concerned about the environment but unwilling to lower their standard of living



Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>

(Dagens Nyheter 21 May 2007, p. 6).

The government report explicitly compares Sweden's contribution to gender equality with its role as a defender of the environment:

Sweden has long been a prime mover at both national and international level in efforts to achieve equality between the sexes and in the promotion of women's rights, as well as on issues relating to the environment and to the broader concept of sustainable development. (p. 9)

The report does not go so far as to claim that Sweden's approach to gender equality is needed if there is to be sustainable development, but the implication seems to be there: women are beneficial for the environment and a policy that empowers them, like Swedish gender equality, will benefit the environment. However, as I have shown, the way in which the report discusses gender difference is ambiguous, suspended between socio-economic factors and quasi-essentialist statements, with the result that men and women and their relationship to the environment are presented in polarised terms.

Teaching the public

Problematic gender assumptions are not confined to government reports. The current flagship of Swedish sustainable urban development is the area of Hammarby Sjöstad in Stockholm (www.hammarbysjostad.se).

The first residents moved into the area in 2000 and it will eventually be home to 28,000 people. The development has been designed to cut energy use by fifty percent, largely by using technical solutions built into the very fabric of the housing and infrastructure. In this respect it conforms to the technical ambitions of the green 'People's Home'. But now, eight



Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>

years on, there is a growing interest in the social dimensions of sustainable development and how the individual can help. The centre for environmental communication in Hammarby Sjöstad is The Glasshouse (*Glashuset*). The personnel there provide residents with information packages and biodegradable bags for the disposal of food waste. They also organise public seminars on sustainable development, reduction of energy consumption, and recycling.

The Glasshouse, too, uses gendered imagery, although in a largely unreflective manner. For example, in one of its campaigns it encouraged visitors to 'slim' their energy use by cutting down on their carbon dioxide emissions. There were mirrors installed like those found at fairgrounds which made people look fat or thin depending on their energy choices. Free 'Diet' booklets on cutting energy consumption in apartments and houses were available. Using the language of slimming and weight loss is loaded with gendered associations that are perhaps better avoided. *Fat, I need hardly remind you, is a feminist issue* (Orbach 1998). High calorific input, and nowadays output, are represented as both sins and indicators of poor character, especially in women.

On other occasions the role of women in combating global warming is made explicit. At an information day for residents a representative of the main energy supplier, Fortum, approached me and my colleague Lissa, obviously assuming that we were a heterosexual couple. In a voice that was half encouraging, half accusing, he asked 'You save energy, don't you?' and then promptly handed Lissa a leaflet with the words 'Because you are the one who's in charge of things like that, aren't you?' It was a small, but nonetheless, telling episode.

None of this would matter if it were not for the fact that Hammarby Sjöstad has hosted thousands of foreign visitors from as far as Mongolia, South Africa, Hawaii and Greenland, all interested in learning about the Hammarby Model, as well as a steady stream of Swedish



Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>

schoolchildren and other interested parties—all of whom meet the gendered images and messages found there.

The future and the foetus

Some of the most striking gendered imagery is found in advertising that appeals to concerns about our environmental futures. It is part of the broader cultural context in which government reports are published and received, and information at places like The Glasshouse is disseminated. It is a context in which futures are inextricably linked to biological reproduction, coming generations, and the unborn. Perhaps it is not altogether surprising, then, that the foetus has made several appearances in recent Swedish attention to the environment. Here are two.

On the farm

The first is a picture on a milk carton seen by millions of Swedes on their breakfast tables. The picture shows Elin Rydström, an 'ecological farmer', in a field at sunrise. Her hand is resting on her belly; she is expecting a child. The text that accompanies the picture reads:

Ecological, for your sake, of course!

I think ecological food feels more natural and healthy. The methods we use in ecological farming are a good starting point for healthier food. For example, we don't use insecticides. When the cows eat a lot of grass, clover, and herbs there is more of the healthy fatty acid Omega-3 in the milk. Apart from the health aspects we choose ecological food because it seems better for the environment. We have to work the whole time to improve our methods toward making us more environmentally friendly, so that we become a natural part of the entire eco-system. Knowing that we

eat food that is grown in real, living soil and from animals that have been



Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>

allowed outside and lived as natural a life as possible also makes me feel better.

Selling cars

The second example is an advertisement for the Ford C-MAX flexifuel car. It features two photographs: one of a dolphin foetus, the other of two polar bear foetuses. In both cases the foetuses appear to be in the womb, surrounded by amniotic fluid and complete with umbilical cords. Regardless of whether or not it is the case, the photographs appear to provide us with a glimpse of living foetuses. The pictures flank a text that reads:

A car is not just performance, a fun drive and lots of leg space. It ought also to be a bit better for all of us on earth. The new Ford C-MAX flexifuel is such a car. It reduces the emission of damaging fossil carbon dioxide by up to 75 percent. It's therefore not only a car for you and your family, but also for the next generation.

In both examples, the future is symbolised by a foetus, clearly visible in the Ford advertisement and suggested by the belly of Elin Rydström. Indeed, in the milk carton picture it is not only the pregnant Elin we see, but also the sunrise and the 'birth' of a new day.

Apart from being a signifier of life and the future the foetus is also the ultimate in *vulnerability*—and nowadays, we are all told that we are vulnerable to global warming. Add to this the special status and affection dolphins enjoy in western countries (see Bryld & Lykke 2000) and the knowledge that the polar bear may be facing extinction in the wild if the Arctic ice caps recede, and we have a very emotive set of images. In each advertisement the foetus is protected: in the first by the wise ecological actions of farmer Elin Rydström, and in the second by Ford's flexifuel car (cf. Taylor 1992). But the use of foetal imagery is risky. By



Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>

casting pregnant women as the *embodiment* of environmental virtues appeals are also made to the *naturalness* of those virtues and, by implication, their absence in any actual woman becomes 'unnatural'. Using images of the foetus also and perhaps unavoidably admits another, more fraught constellation of associations and emotions. Medical imaging techniques have driven a wedge between the mother's body and the foetus, in which the latter appears as an independent agent in its own right: what Lauren Berlant (1997, p. 97) terms 'foetal personhood'. This is exploited in anti-abortion campaigns, in which the mother is the potential *threat* to the foetus and not its protector. Mothers lacking ecological virtue are likewise a threat to both the foetus and the future.

Concluding remarks

My aim here has not been to criticise demands for gender equality. Nor do I deny that ecological and environmental gains can be made if we take greater account of the different perspectives *some* women can bring to the problem. What I have focused on here is the way that Swedish moral claims in the field of gender and the environment, persistent traditional gender norms, quasi-essentialist gender, and the use of very emotive and, for women, even politically risky, images and associations can be found woven together in contemporary Sweden.

The following all work to suture responsibility onto and into women's bodies, and in so doing naturalise women's environmental responsibilities:

- employing the image of the pregnant woman and visually associating the future well-being of humanity and the planet with the foetus (including animal foetuses)
- associating metaphors of dieting with the cultural imperative that women 'take care' of their bodies to encourage them to take care of the planet
- assuming that it is women who wear the environmental pants at home



Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>

- ascribing a 'naturally' superior environmental ethics to women.

Moreover, by linking gender equality, as it is understood in Sweden, to environmental concerns, the gender norms and quasi-essentialisms that inform the former are inserted into the latter, possibly reinforcing the division of labour already in place in Swedish attention to sustainability and climate change, differentiated between technical (male) and social (female) approaches. It may also insulate the optimistic (and almost certainly unrealistic) technological modernisation of the green 'People's Home' from the anxieties surrounding the personal and intimate level of environmental concern, anxieties which are increasingly identified, or perhaps we ought to say projected onto, women and the feminine.

References

Adam, B 1998, *Timescapes of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards*, Routledge, London.

Berlant, L 1997, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: essays on sex and citizenship*, Duke University Press, Durham & London.

Bryd, M & Lykke, N 2000, *Cosmodolphins: feminist cultural studies of technology, animals and the sacred*, ZED, London.

Dagens Nyheter 2007, 'Gärna uppoffring för miljön – men inte sänkt standard', 21 May, p. 6.

Dagens Nyheter 2007, 'Var tredje mycket oroad över klimatet', 15 October, p. 9.

Lundqvist, L 2004, 'Greening the People's Home: The Formative Power of Sustainable Development Discourse in Swedish Housing', *Urban Studies*, vol. 41, no. 7, pp. 1283-1301.

Martinsson, L 2000, 'Annorlundahet som fetisch – om politik och erfarenhet', in *Porträtt utan ram. Kön och sexualitet bortom strukturalism*, in Y, Hagström (ed.), Lund, Studentlitteratur.

Orbach, S 1998, *Fat is a Feminist Issue: the anti-diet guide for women*, London, Arrow.



Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)
UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>

Swedish Ministry of Sustainable Development 2006, *Initial Study of Lifestyles, Consumption Patterns, Sustainable Development and Gender: Do women leave a smaller ecological footprint than men?*, Regeringskansliet, Stockholm.

Taylor, J 1992, 'The Public Fetus and the Family Car: From Abortion Politics to a Volvo Advertisement', *Public Culture*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 67-80.

Warren, K (ed.) 1994, *Ecological Feminism*, Routledge, London.

Warren, K (ed.) 1996, *Ecological Feminist Philosophies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.



Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>