Agriculture and Human Values **21**: 355–365, 2004.

IN THE FIELD

Relational dynamics and strategies: Men and women in a forest community in Sweden

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Accepted in revised form October 20, 2003

Abstract. This article views gender dynamics and strategies for change in a small Swedish village from a systems perspective. In the context of the struggle for the communal management of forests, tensions arose in the relations among the people in the village who differed in their opinions as to how to approach village development. Some village women argued for the importance of issues other than only community forestry in the development of the community's future livelihoods and well-being. They also believed that linking these activities with each other are vital for the community. Co-operative inquiry with women in the village reveals that, in their view, the community's overall needs are the most meaningful point of departure and not just individual resource management initiatives. They believed that it was vital to link resource management with other developmental activities in the village. The inquiry process also shows how the differences that may arise between men and women are dependent on the context, their relationships, and the networks they activate rather than the differences emerging solely from gender roles or the structure. Attention to how women and men "draw boundaries" around their activities and relationships expands our understanding of the diverse means they use for reaching their objectives. It also highlights the role of innovators who cross these boundaries and work toward change.

Key words: Community forestry, Formal/informal arenas, Gender relations, "Gränsgångare," Integrated solutions, Livelihoods, Systems thinking.

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Introduction

This is the story of a village in the sparsely populated and peripheral region of northwestern Sweden. It is the story of people in a forest community who wanted to continue to live in this place that was special for them and to keep what they had, a home in the mountains and a life in the countryside with close ties to the nature all around them. There were other things they wanted to change to be able to keep what they had. They wanted to manage the forests in new ways that would generate employment for people to be able to stay in the village and for new people to be able to move in. They wanted housing for the people who wanted to return to the village after having lived outside, day-care for children who were small, and old age homes for the elderly to prevent them from moving out of the village when they grew old and needed medical care. They wanted to keep the community together and the school as it always had been, at the heart of the village and a symbol of their determination to keep the village alive.

This is the story of how they went about it in different ways. It talks about the importance of community spirit, of seeing links between various activities and people, and the possible drawback of dividing up activities. It illustrates the importance of information sharing even in a small village with a small population. It is also a story of relationships being negotiated, of the power to represent and define the village for themselves and for those outside, flowing from one person to another, and of tensions arising as new ideas and impulses jostle with older and familiar ways of working and the *status quo* is challenged and defended. Each activity affects the others in some way and the people carrying them out are linked to each other inextricably

in networks of family, friendship, disagreement, work, and everyday village life. Every action taken has a bearing on other activities and other people in the village. The whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Narrowing our gaze from the larger picture, the paper moves on to look at the individuals active in the village, the resources available, the strategies they used, and the obstacles in their way. This story focuses on the women in the village and specifically on some women who took the lead and tried to organize the women in the village around a joint agenda. Together, they tried to define what they wanted for themselves, their families, and the village. It is a story of how the women as part of the village tried to keep their homes in the village by working actively to invigorate village life.

The paper begins with a discussion of the prevailing theories of gender relations and systems thinking relevant to the issues raised. There is then a brief description of the study methods used. This is followed by the story, which leads to a discussion using systems thinking and gender theories. The paper concludes with a discussion of the emergent questions and the potential usefulness of approaching such a study in this way.

Soft systems thinking, gender relations and resource management

A soft system is a social construct that is used to understand the complex reality of the world around us (Checkland and Scholes, 1991). A soft systems perspective views relationships as primary within human activity systems, that is, as holding the system in place for an agreed purpose. Boundary-defining activity by the actors who make up the human activity system, can be extended to include other members in the "web of life," encompassing also relationships with non-human subjects (Capra, 1996).

Over the last decade, there has been a growing concern with the hidden roles and interests of women in the management of resources (cf. Harcourt, 1994, Rocheleau and Edmunds, 1995; Guijt et al., 1999). Feminist research has shown that even in participatory research "gender was hidden in seemingly inclusive terms: 'the people', 'the oppressed', the 'campesinos' or simply 'the community'. It was only when comparing . . . projects that it became clear that 'the community' was all too often the male-community" (Maguire, 1996: 29–30). The system that presents itself as neutral and without gender is often built upon the heterosexual male as the norm (cf. Guijt and Shah, 1998; Eduards, 2002).

In recent times, there has been a conceptual shift in the treatment of gender identities. Gender relations are seen not as given but "constructed through the meanings and practices which invest them with particular significance in everyday social interchange and cemented in the institutional fabric of society" (Whatmore et al., 1994: 4). This also implies that the "social categories 'women' and 'men' do not describe uniform experiences of femininity or masculinity but are cross-cut by other social divisions and identities . . . which are themselves socially constructed and dynamic" (ibid). The view taken in this paper is that gender relations and roles are constructed in everyday interactions among men and women. Cooper (1995: 9, 25) writes,

> It does not make sense therefore to talk about men holding power as if this capacity exists independently of women, or as if men can ontologically precede gender relations. . . Those forces at the dominant end of the polarity do not necessarily construct or create the situation, but rather their domination emerges as a result of the wider social relations within which they are embedded.

Research has shown how men and women take on roles and relationships in ways that may be considered untraditional even though there may be an accepted cultural norm of what is "masculine" or "feminine" (e.g., Guijt and Shah, 1999). Studies in rural Sweden reveal that the gender-based division of labor that supposedly existed on the farm is more an abstraction than reality (Frånberg, 1998: 170). In times of need, women take over men's work and *vice versa* even though it may not be officially recognized.[1] "Foucauldian notions of power as fragmented and dispersed are more useful here than in the dualistic opposition of powerful men and weak women in much structural gender analysis" (Jackson, 1998: 317). Individual men and women can be seen as having "agency" to affect their circumstances and the structures that surround them. Agency can be understood partly as the capacity to manage actively the often discontinuous, overlapping or conflictual relations of power (McNay, 2000: 16). Women are not passive recipients of external determination, although there may be powerful constraints, both internal and external, to how identities are shaped. The defining characteristics of women's identity may be understood by looking at the context that they act within, their dilemmas and how they present themselves in their daily lives. Their agency can be seen in their autonomous actions in the face of cultural sanctions and structural inequalities.

Environmental feminists have pointed to women's close relationship with the resources, in the management of which, they have little formal role and negligible decision-making authority. Their presence in management committees is extremely important in bringing about change in their favor and ensuring them a voice in the management of resources (cf. Agarwal,

1997). The structure and form of the committees, however, may not always provide openings for their voices and other issues. To look at what the women themselves may want from the process and if and on what terms they may want to join these groups forms the subject matter of this paper. It is for this reason that the study intentionally focuses on the shifting roles, behavior, and viewpoints of women in the village.

Methods of inquiry

The paper is based on semi-structured interviews with 6 men and 23 women,[2] and on the initial stages of a co-operative inquiry process that was initiated with women in the village of Byadalen in northwestern Sweden (October 1998–September 2000). A process diary was kept by the researcher, in addition to minutes, reports from meetings as well as interview material. Initial interviews were carried out with five women who were already working on issues of concern to the whole village (October, 1998). On their suggestion, 17 other women were interviewed (May, 1999), using the snowball technique (sequentially identifying new respondents). The purpose was to obtain an insight into their thinking and contribute to the further development of a nascent women's group. Although 6 men were also interviewed, the focus has been on the women respondents.

A report summarizing all 23 interviews with the women was given back to the women respondents. This was followed by a meeting (June, 1999) with all the women involved. Their views, future action, and perspectives on village activities were discussed together with me as the principal researcher. The women also discussed setting up a women's network that would work with the larger village association. My role at this stage was jointly defined as encompassing three activities: to attend their meetings, carry out participant observation, and document the proceedings. The methodology finally crystallized into a form of "co-operative inquiry" (e.g., Reason, 1994). It was inspired also by the Swedish tradition of "research circles" (e.g., Härnsten, 1994). In such an inquiry, the researcher becomes a member of the circle. The members undertake the inquiry together as co-researchers on a topic they select as their focus of interest, and the research questions are defined together by the group.

This paper offers a description of a stage in the process that continued to evolve. The circle continued to meet, act, and discuss collaboration, and to reflect on their activities. Even as the research continued, the circumstances were changing. This serves to remind us that this is a story that remains unfinished and is a partial view from the storyteller's perspective. In this representation of human inquiry,

> I am aware of constructing a 'fiction' as I systematically select and represent events and interpretations that are unavoidably partial. . . The story-teller's narrative is a version that cannot be claimed as the only truth; yet the issue of subjectivity – how we each construct and give meaning to our experiences as we dynamically position ourselves in relation to others – is present within any human inquiry and its representation (Treleaven, 1994: 140).

The story

The village of Byadalen[3] is set in what is known as the *glesbygd,* translated literally from the Swedish as sparsely populated, and traditionally associated with the inland areas in north, northwest, and southeast Sweden. The word *glesbygd* conjures a special picture in the Swedish mind. It has long been seen as referring to large contiguous areas with sparse populations, and long distances to towns, employment, and services (Glesbygdsverket, 1997).[4] It is within this area that the valley of Byadalen lies, nestling in the Swedish mountains on the border with Norway.

Migration flows between various parts of the country have for a long time been central to the Swedish discussion of regional balance (Borgegård and Håkansson, 1999). More recently, the emigration of young women as compared to men from the countryside has been the cause of much alarm among policy makers. Depopulation in these areas began in the 1950s when the State needed labor in the towns and cities. "People were cajoled to move to towns and were given 'moving grants' to set up homes in other places. As the wave of industrialization subsided, there were no matching moving home grants," said Ruth, an elderly woman, who had returned to the village with her husband when work in the cities had dried up. There has been considerable migration from the village. In the last decade, the population has stabilized around 120 people while surrounding villages have been gradually depopulated. The majority of the adult population is between the ages of 40 and 50, which makes the median age very low for a village in such an area (figures put together by the village in a PRA exercise in 1998).

In the first round of interviews in the village, the women claimed that traditional sex/gender roles in the past have been well defined and strong in their part of Sweden. These roles have changed over the years. Fewer men work in agriculture or forestry and many women work outside the home. The women carry the main responsibility for the home. Small-scale farming and forestry that used to be the mainstay of the people

in these areas gradually disappeared as large-scale farming and forestry were encouraged in the country. Men from the villages around the forests initially found employment with the big forest companies that managed the forests. But with increased rationalization, such employment opportunities also began to disappear. At the time of the study, a couple of people had their own companies in carpentry, tourism, and there were two entrepreneurs in transport and construction. Other villagers worked for the county, for the state, with the church, and in a nearby tourist resort. Most of the women worked in service occupations like care-taking, often as "hemsamarit."[5] In fact, people joked in the interviews that some of the women who were "hemsamariter" were themselves old enough to need care.

The gradual depopulation of these areas led the local governments to cut down on infrastructural facilities everywhere and Byadalen was no exception. Among other things, the post office and the local grocery outlet in the village disappeared and parents were urged to send their children to schools in the town. Byadalen was known for its enduring battle with the authorities to keep the school alive in their village. They established one of the first "friskola" in Sweden wherein the villagers ran the school themselves with some financial help from the state. Parents and other villagers worked voluntarily and were responsible for running the school and employing the teachers and so on.

Relations with the local authorities at the municipality had not always been very congenial. The villagers were very aware of themselves as upstarts in their refusal to accept what they perceived as unjust. In several interviews, villagers recounted stories about how neighboring villages and towns regarded them as troublemakers. Many believed that there had been a conspiracy at the municipality to make life difficult for the people in the village ever since they won the school strike (see also Ersson, 1985). The long battle for the school had caused a certain amount of animosity with the authorities at the municipality although others believed that now with a change of officials, things were beginning to get better. There was a generational difference in that the younger people active in the village (many of whom moved back to the village in recent years) had sought co-operation with local authorities, whereas the older generation viewed them with distrust. At an inquiry circle meeting, the women, most of them in their 40s, spoke well of one of the local politicians who was in the municipal council. They felt that he understood their problems and managed to bring up their questions at the municipal level. The women felt that he was responsive to their concerns because he was from their area and was able to understand their needs. After the last municipality reform in 1974, the number of municipalities in Sweden had been amalgamated in larger units. The municipal center for Byadalen had moved much further south, leading to a greater feeling of alienation among the people far away from the centers of decision-making.

Community life was organized through various associations in the village. Much like in what is becoming widespread in other parts of Sweden (Forsberg, 2001; Herlitz, 2001), the village had several associations to deal with different things, the village hall association, the school association, the sports association and so on. In 1995, several villagers formed Byadalen's "village association." It was meant to be an umbrella for all the other associations in the village and to strengthen the effects that the associations would have individually. The aim was to create opportunities to sustain a vibrant community in the village. They set up an information center for the village and started a newsletter about village activities. The head of the village association was Gustav, the school's former principal, one of the people who had led the school strike and seen the school through all its problems. He commanded a great deal of respect in the village especially as most of the younger inhabitants of the village had been taught by him in school at one time or another. He was also the chairman of most of the other associations in the village. In interviews and discussions, the villagers often pointed out that being a small village, it was often the same people active in the various associations. This is also the case in other parts of Sweden (cf. Forsberg, 2001). Much of the work was done on a voluntary basis, as was the case with most other village activities.

Men and women expressed their different concerns in the agenda they drew up for the village association (*This is what we want with Byadalen*). The women members brought into the public discussion what they called "social issues," i.e., those issues the women said were important and meaningful to them, such as day-care, old age homes, housing for people who wanted to move back to the village, the village shop, horseback-riding for the village children and tourists, a village meeting place. One of the main items on the agenda that some men took up was to try to get the right to manage the forests locally, owned by a semi-private company at that time. The aim was to preserve the forest and to restore it as a "living forest" after a period of large-scale forest management and intense logging. They wanted to be able to derive an income from small-scale forestry and tourism.

The forest question

The forests have always been an intrinsic part of the lives of the people in this area. "The forest is the shirt of the poor, their protection from the cold and their home," goes an old Swedish saying. "The forests

follow a person from birth to death'' (Ersson, 1985: 7). The forests that the villagers were interested in, surrounded their village and were a part of the 174, 000 ha of forest land that in 1998 still belonged to the company. There was a long-standing dispute between the inhabitants and the State in this area. There were villagers in the area who had title deeds to pieces of forest land taken over by the State in the latter part of the 1800s, for which, they claimed that they were never compensated (also see Holmbäck, 1934). Many also related stories of how their ancestors were cheated out of the land, which came under the management of the Swedish Forest Service in the late 1800s. At least one person from a neighboring village had taken up this cause and was in the midst of a protracted legal battle with the State.

Several historians working within this area have expressed surprise that the appropriation of the forests act did not bring forth much protest from the local inhabitants (e.g., Björck cited in Eriksson, 1997). But, the villagers of Byadalen said that this was probably because, in most cases, they were able to use the forests as before. In their stories, they explained that although they lost formal or statutory rights, the villagers in the area continued to use the forests and informally exercise most of their user rights. They narrated how gradually they were restricted from exercising rights like fishing, hunting, being able to use the forest for tourist activities, firewood and lichen collecting, and small-scale forestry and processing. The only right they had left was one that was applicable for everyone in the country, the ''allemansrätt'' or the right of public access.

In 1992, one part of the forest became a nature reserve under the municipal arm of the county government. Much of the management practices of the Swedish Forest Service were based on logging an area intensively. This resulted in leaving large areas bare of any forests, as the growing period for trees is extremely long in this rugged terrain. Men and women recounted stories of their struggle with the Forest Service, of trying to stop them from cutting the forests. Most of these areas are in close proximity to the nature reserve around the village. In 1993, the commercially viable forests were transferred to a joint stock company, mentioned above, in which the state had a 51% share. The village association, in recent years, had protested the relentless logging of the forests by the company. Spurred by the news in 1996 that the company planned to sell the remaining forests to private buyers, the village association felt that they had to act to save the forests that were still standing. They felt that any purchaser would be bound to further fell the forest in order to subsidize the purchase. Also, they believed that once the forests went into private ownership, in all likelihood to people who did not live in the area, they would have no say whatsoever over the forests surrounding their homes.

The village association, led by some of the village men approached the county government with a plan detailing how they could manage the nature reserve at the local level. The forestry project was initially led by Gustav with an active part played by Karl, a younger man not originally from the village. Karl, a skilled carpenter, had moved to the village more recently with his family. He wanted to make a life for himself in the village and the forest project provided one opening for a future there. His interests in computers and filmmaking were very useful in the project. In a conversation with the researcher, Karl described how the county government merely laughed at them and turned them away when the villagers approached them with their plans in 1996. At this time, the association leadership came in contact with a few local politicians at the municipality who were interested in their cause. Through them they met some staff from an agricultural university, whose interest lay in supporting community forestry initiatives. They supported the cause of the village by helping them lobby international environmental organizations and government authorities in Stockholm. Together they attended conferences and presented papers on their struggle and in this way came in contact with forest communities in other parts of Sweden as well as with local people struggling with similar issues in other parts of the world. With the help of the university, the men also made a video film detailing irregularities in compliance with the sustainable forestry certification criteria that the forest company claimed to fulfill.

As the negotiations and lobbying were done outside, the scene of action moved away from the village. In the village itself, only a handful of men remained involved. Since 1997/98, all these activities have given them a new standing to argue for their cause. However, the physical state of the forest and their rights to it remained the same even after the sale of the forests to a state-owned company. In the meantime, the interests of the group of men most active in the forest struggle drifted away from those of the rest of the village, and became distanced from the issues that the women in the association had wanted to take up.

Tensions of difference

> There is little happening in the village itself that can be felt or seen. If one does not believe there is anything going on, then one loses the spirit. Women like to see immediate and tangible changes in the village itself. We want action and we want results. We are tired of meetings and talk.

This quote by a woman in the village reflects that not everything was harmonious within the community itself. Tensions developed on how to proceed once the association began its work, although these were not discussed openly in the village association or elsewhere. In interviews, many women expressed the feeling that the emphasis on the forests had pushed the women's more immediate concerns into the background. This had led to the dropping out of the two or three women involved in the association, as they did not find support for their ideas and their way of working. As Cecilia explained, ''local management should include everything, not just plans about what to do with the forests in the long run.'' Cecilia had moved back to the village recently and had restarted the village shop that had been closed for a long time. It had not been an easy task. Her determination and endless negotiations with authorities for loans made it possible for her to keep the shop open for a brief while. She had discussed with Gustav the possibility that the association eventually would take over the shop and hoped to be employed by the village association to run it. She talked about the things that they needed right away – that the association should help run the shop, plan for housing, should help to manage day-care for children and an old age home for the elderly.

Several women who joined the co-operative inquiry felt that the village should take up the ''forest'' and ''social'' activities together. Although both were mentioned in the original agenda of the village association, over time, the social aspects got left behind with the emphasis on the forest project. The women believed that if they wanted more people to move back to their village, they needed to get the social issues in order as well. ''To be able to do anything in the forest, one needs a vibrant village life to make it succeed. Also, no family with children is likely to move to the countryside if the village does not have services like day-care, shop, housing etc.'' In group discussions, some women felt that the men in the village association always put too much emphasis on future plans rather than immediate actions.

The women also said that the formal rules and the procedures of the association's meetings, such as a pre-set agenda, left very little time for them to talk about their work. They claimed that the insistence on a formal protocol, like being able to speak out only when called upon by the chairperson and other such strict procedures, all contributed to a great deal of formality and were time-consuming. Because they found the protocol inhibiting, many women stopped going for the meetings. For other women, practical considerations such as responsibilities at home and the care of children gave them very little time to attend and it was mostly men who attended village meetings.

There was a general feeling among the women that I spoke to that not very much happened at the association's meetings. ''Men are dependent on meetings,'' said Cecilia who in recent times had been active in village meetings. ''The association has planned a lot but one can't see so much of it in the village. So people begin to feel that it is all talk and not much done and thus have tended to lose the will to do something about it.'' One or two women were more critical. Sarah said that it was a battle to be active in the association. It took a great deal of energy and time. Karin felt that women were mostly silent at the meetings, but were still expected to make coffee and help at conferences.

Sarah had moved back from a city and had planned to make Byadalen her home. She was determined to start a goat farm with her sister but also to work for the village. She had taken an active interest in the activities of the association but claimed that it was not very easy. She could do so since she did not have small children in the house. At a later stage, she was made the chairperson of the association, although that caused its own share of problems and conflicts.

Two of the women I spoke to felt that many men did not think that women were capable of running associations. ''Strong women scare them,'' said Kerstin in an interview, ''they must show interest in letting women in, it is not just good enough to expect women to turn up at the meetings and organize the food and drinks. Anyway, now most women have jobs outside the home. They can't be expected to do volunteer work for them all the time.'' Previously, a teacher in a nearby town school, Kerstin had come up against the school authorities, among others things, for having the children meditate in-between classes. She had also started a meditation circle in the village for a while, which in a way formed the initial core group of the inquiry. Her big project was to start a healing and recreation center in the village where people could come and relax in the peace and quiet of the beautiful mountains and the forests.

The women who were active in the village chose to work in ways where, they said, they were not constrained by the formal atmosphere of the association's meetings. They wanted to see more immediate changes in the village. They turned to other ways of working. One of the dreams in the village was to revive livestock farming activities. In order to realize this dream, two women took the initiative to form a cattle-grazing association and started a co-operative for this purpose. They managed to get some support from the municipality and women and men from 16 families became involved in this enterprise. They also began working to set up a goat farm. Their other activities were of a more practical nature as well, such as getting a

ski-slope organized as a meeting point in winter or working to get the camping grounds in order.

In their group discussions, the women talked about trying to integrate the various activities, sometimes in a single project. A few women had ideas about integrating several projects so that one place, both geographical and in terms of coordination, could be the central point for various activities. Then again, there were others in the village who believed that for things to be done, they needed to be done individually. Thomas believed that co-operatives and co-operation were bound to cause problems. There would always be conflicts. He waved away the suggestion that if there was no co-operative, the villagers would not have been able to have the cows in the village. In his opinion, it would probably fall apart. Sooner or later, someone would come into conflict with someone else.

The women in the circle thought otherwise. At the time of the interviews, the women were also in the process of building a loose network in order to take up other issues important for themselves and the village. They talked about how they needed to link up with the forest project without losing sight of their other priorities. The women stressed that the chosen activities needed to be viewed in relation to each other rather than in isolation. They felt that the men working with the forest issues had been focusing on only one issue. Even within the forest project, according to Kerstin, activity was focused on the economic part. She told the following story. At the insistence of one of the men working with the forest project, she had attended a meeting where people from other villages were invited. It was an effort to build up a local network of people working with community forestry. She began to talk about the spiritual and other personal aspects of the forests that she felt were being ignored in the discussion. Surprisingly for many, there was much enthusiasm as the men too began to talk about their experiences in the forest and the meaning such experiences had for them, but which they often kept separate from their work. It was the presence and courage of this woman, who created a space for such reflections in a formal meeting forum that made it, for a brief while, legitimate to cross the prescribed and ideal boundaries of a formal agenda.

The co-operative inquiry circle eventually became not quite planned at the outset, but what the group came to call a ''kvinnoforum,'' a women's forum, where women could find a place to meet and talk. As they organized themselves for the times they met, they began to invite women from other villages to join them as well. The group grew as they looked for ways to increase ''gemenskap,'' togetherness or a sense of community in their village. It involved other women not working directly with the village but who came to meet each other and talk about the future, their village, their children, and life. They often met in the former village shop and decided to call it the ''Dreamhouse'' the place from where they would make their dreams, both old and new, come true.[6] In their effort to make it a women's forum, they decided not to take up spiritualism, as it might antagonize others with different religious beliefs, although it was this that had brought together many of the women in the first place.

Discussion

In face of dwindling services and pressures to move to larger towns, the women and men of Byadalen worked hard to keep their village from disappearing from the map of the Swedish countryside. For the women's forum, keeping the community spirit alive was of utmost importance. They believed that forest issues were unlikely to be resolved without tangible change in the village itself. Their point of departure in terms of village development was the community and not necessarily a specific project or activity. For the women, the community constituted not just the people in the village with different hopes and views, but the spirit that kept the people together, that made them want to live here, far away from medical help and other such everyday modern services. In systems' terms, the women took a holistic perspective. Cecilia, for example, spoke of the need to focus on the larger vision, that of the self-managing village where the local management of the forest was a natural and obvious part of the whole. The founding of the village association and writing up a joint program was a step in this direction. It was a time when the women said that the villagers had begun to work with community projects and once again, since the school strike, it felt that the village spirit was back. This is what they felt they needed to build upon. The men in the village association prioritized work with the forests. The distancing of the forest project from the rest of the village broke the links between the various activities and the people involved. The forests were given importance by the men leading the association because the forests had the potential of generating employment opportunities. In their view employment was what would attract younger people to move to the village. The other social aspects on the agenda for the village, central for many of the women, were seen as essential requirements, but employment was the hook. In addition, the interest shown by outsiders in supporting their cause, the fact that negotiation of rights to the forests could have more general interest than merely for the village, gave this issue greater importance for the men leading the association.

Women and men in Byadalen came together in various associations and groupings to work with the myriad of different activities in the village. This paper highlights how some men and women in the village chose to work with a few of them. In this particular instance, the women had grouped themselves on the basis of their sex while there were other alliances in the village based on different organizing principles and social identities, e.g., occupation or age. The women chose to organize themselves in their own "forum" partly because they did not identify with existing structures in the village. Although every get-together demanded a certain amount of organizing, the "kvinnoforum" did not have a formal structure. It took shape and came alive every time that the women met. The form it took on each occasion could be different depending on who was present. Nevertheless, it held an underlying meaning for the women and whenever they met, they reaffirmed its importance in strengthening them in their work and social life. Many saw the women's forum as a springboard from where they would reinvigorate village social life in order to re-establish the links between village activities and between the people working with different projects. The women insisted on the need to keep everyone in the village informed about the associations' activities. The village newsletter was made the responsibility of one of the women who was to ensure that this was done. Some women joined the forest project as well.

The perspective of working to link village activities and basing their work with outside interventions securely within the village made the women successfully carry out many ideas.[7] The women drew their boundaries around the relationships and activities within the village while they tried to bring about change by activating new relationships and organizing in new ways. This action was spearheaded by particular individuals whom I call the "gränsgångare"[8] (boundary walkers). In face of constraints, it is these "gränsgångare" who connect with other systems of thought, traverse the boundaries of meaning, and make change possible.[9] The "gränsgångare" worked to make space for a women's group and encouraged other women to come forward with their dreams and hopes. The moral support of the women's group and of the others in the village and affirmation from people outside was important for these women. Overtures or small openings provided by others played an important part in boosting their confidence and stimulating them to seize the initiative. In the forest meeting that Kerstin attended, it was important for her that she had been invited there. Once given this opening, she could take the risk of bringing up questions not on the agenda. Eva, after having attended the annual "rural parliament"[10] organized in Sweden, commented at an inquiry meeting, "One realizes that even small people like us, can raise our voices, we can affect rural development in Sweden." Having been there, Sarah felt, was like an injection of hope and energy. Sarah, who later became the chairperson of the village association, with the active support of Karl, had an official position that gave her the confidence to reach out to more people. However, this was also the space where she realized the limitations of being able to take action. Meetings were sometimes organized without her, which, she as chairperson should have been a part of. She did cross boundaries but it was not easy and her questioning of old procedures led to several conflicts.

Sarah was seen as being confrontational and as disrupting the *status quo*. But there were other strategies that the women used when trying to get things done, depending on the space they had for taking action. Kerstin spoke about using "feminine guile," an attribute often associated with women in order to get others to co-operate. In her work, Frånberg (1994) sees feminine guile as a positive strategy through which women try to influence events for their benefit by channels other than the dominant channels defined by men. Being "impulsive," was another attribute that the women chose to interpret more positively. They believed that since women did not have the time for long meetings and discussions, they often acted upon their impulses and actually got things done. Networking with people around the coffee table and putting forward her ideas through her husband at meetings was a strategy that Britta often used in the village. The activities of the women in the inquiry group leaned towards a preference for the informal, the overtly apolitical, an approach that has been characteristic of women's groups elsewhere (Bull, 1995; Rönnblom, 1997; Bock, 1999).

Gendering the system

Systems thinkers have been pointing out increasingly that the world is interdependent and interconnected (Capra, 1996; Pearson and Ison, 1997; Scoones, 1999). Soft-systems thinking enables us to trace links between activities and issues espoused by the villagers as well as the links between the people driving these issues. This helps to see the "whole" or the larger picture, however partial, and changing the whole may be in the inquiry at hand. Village activities may be seen systemically where all parts have a bearing on each other. For example, it enables one to link issues of the forest to housing for people who would work in the forest and to child-care, which would free them to work with community issues or to the school that would prompt young families to move to the village. The relationships between and among the villagers and others as they work for village livelihoods may be seen to be the

basis of how effects are generated. Since these relationships are changing and changeable, the future is co-created in the dynamic.

However, there are regularities in these relationships that are made explicit when examining their gendered implications. Looking at them in terms of gender helps in understanding why a women's forum was so inviting for the women in the village. It explains why the handing over of leadership to a woman did not necessarily imply a shift in power. It explains the consternation among the men in the village association when many women chose to organize in new ways, disturbing the "regularity" of existing relationships. That some of the older men had the option to exercise agency not available to Sarah (despite her office) was not a random event. "While not all men choose to exploit this advantage – to exercise power – an individual's abstention does not make the advantage disappear. Neither men nor women can simply 'opt out' of gender's organizing framework,[11] although both can find ways of disrupting it" (Cooper, 1995: 10). In the inquiry group, the women spent a lot of time trying to articulate what it was that brought them together despite their differences. Their collective identity as the women of Byadalen was not simply a reflection of the past. Their identity was based on a shared history actively constructed and interpreted (cf. Ferree, 1995). Meeting and discussing their lives and dreams had a value in itself, "as a liberating, identity shaping, empowering process" (Eduards, 1992: 96). The setting up of the group, ostensibly "apolitical," was uncomfortable for some villagers, both men and women. They did not see the need for a women's forum when there were other associations in the village. Neither did they understand why the women opted to have their own forum when they could be working for the village association. There was also a feeling that it enabled some women to assume more importance in the village than they deserved. Women organizing as women on the basis of their sex was of some concern and may be "seen as a challenge to the prevailing system, that presents people as without gender" (cf. Eduards, 1992; Young, 1990). The women in the inquiry were seen to be acting politically even though they were not overtly challenging the system.

Among practitioners and researchers working on issues of natural resource management with village communities, the narrative sketched above is often disregarded as "village politics" or personal issues within the informal sphere, which detract from the focus on the main question. This paper has tried to show that when working with community management of resources, this informal sphere plays a vital part in the unfolding of the more "formal" question. Literature on natural resource management, while recognizing the importance of informal arenas, has focused largely on formal decision-making platforms (cf. Cleaver, 1998). This leaves little insight into other aspects, not obviously related at first sight, but that have significant bearing on the question. Nor does it give an insight into the people who are excluded or chosen to opt out of these formal spaces, and who by doing so, affect the working of the formal groups and associations.

Interventions from outside help to shape village power politics, although that may not always be recognized. For example, outsiders from the university had a major role in the forest process and in highlighting this question within Byadalen. A community may be dominated by a few people and outside interventions could serve both to strengthen the emancipatory aspects of local culture at the same time as reinforcing oppressive power relations (Mattsson, 2001). Power relations in Byadalen initially precluded tensions being aired openly. The interviews with the women and the documentation of meetings and writing of reports by the researcher may have contributed in bringing to the surface tensions that may have been better resolved differently. The role that outsiders have played is, therefore, critical. What are the implications of the ways in which we have worked?

Conclusions

Studies of gender relations in the management of natural resources and community development tend to focus on individual natural resource use or community development projects. The researcher's original purpose was to look at gender in relation to the community forestry project, but the methodology enabled the members of the co-operative inquiry to change the direction of the study itself. The methodology used in this case enabled the women and the researcher to take a more holistic approach and see connections between seemingly unrelated issues. Similarly, for the purpose of this paper, soft systems' tools have been useful in seeing links between the everyday domestic issues, such as the care of children with the "larger" issue of forest management. In other words, the study looks at the "informal" along with the "formal" as parts of a system.

The commonly held assumption of formal committees and associations as "the community," fails to show the complexities and inter-dependencies outside of these arenas that help to determine outcomes in issues of common concern. This practice excludes others, especially women who are often not a part of formal associations but play a major role in informal village relationships. In Byadalen for instance, the forest question became divorced from the social context of which

it was a part, at a time when it would have benefited from the villagers' active support. For the women's group in Byadalen, in their relations with others, they were both empowered and marginalized (cf. Cooper, 1995). Some women initially took up questions of interest to them in the village association and a woman was made its chairperson with the support of some of the men. Women's inclusion in meetings and conferences gave them confidence and they often discovered that they were not alone with the issues they wanted to take up. On the other hand, a change in leadership of the village association and the involvement of more women did not automatically imply a change in routines and procedures or in who decided on village affairs. The women chose to focus their work within the village partly because their ''integrated'' solutions did not appeal to more sectoral styles of working, both outside and within the village. Their resolve to start by building upon community spirit rather than directing their energies towards actors outside has gendered connotations. By paying close attention to the roles and concerns of women, and by taking soft-systems thinking's approach to the process of grassroots activism, we are able to see more fully how village innovation and development may work. One may also see how in taking action, the women of Byadalen transformed not only themselves, but also the structures around themselves in the wider web of relationships of which they were a part.

Notes

1. Flygare (1999: 222) writes about the division of labor on two Swedish farms. She cites the work of Thorsen, who writes that this division was flexible in the sense that it was the women who were flexible and could take on work that was not specifically ''feminine.'' Men on the other hand were liable to be ridiculed if they took on work normally associated with women.
2. There were about 36 women between the ages of 30 and 80 in the village at the time of the interviews.
3. The name of the village and inhabitants have been changed in order to safeguard their identity.
4. Quoted in Förnyelsens Landskap – bygdepolitik för 2000-talet, Glesbygdsverket's annual report, 1997. *My translation from Swedish original.*
5. Home Samaritans visit people in their homes and help in care-taking.
6. Much to the irritation of one of the men in the association who did not think that they could unilaterally name a building in the village.
7. Unfortunately, not all these projects were successful in the long run due to financial and other difficulties.
8. Adapted from Inga Michaeli and Louise Waldén.
9. To some extent, these may be compared to the ''boundary spanners'' in some organizational learning literature (cf. Brown and Duguid, 1991).
10. The rural parliaments are convened by a new social movement's campaign, Hela Sverige ska leva, All Sweden shall live. It was founded in the late 1980s and is composed of rural voluntary associations, governmental bodies, and so on. For more information, see Vail (1996).
11. Gender is not the only organizing principle in understanding social relations. Race, class, geography are some of the other important principles. ''Organizing principles . . tend to shape the exercise of power at all stages. . . Although these principles will be condensed differently according to the form or site in question, they are not constantly recreated from scratch at each instance'' (Eisenstein, 1988: 19).

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