

Naming as a mirror of social structures – the usage of women’s names in Early Modern Swedish official records

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Abstract

Referring to a person by his or her name is only one of several ways of identifying a person. In this paper, I will discuss some examples of different identifying means and, in particular, the usage of names for women in official records collected from several geographical areas and different socio-economic strata in 17th century Sweden. In accordance with the patriarchal and hierarchical society of that time, women were mostly denoted by their relationship to men, e.g. to their father, husband or son, and their own name isn’t always given in the notice. However, several women are recorded with their own name with no reference to any man. Some questions about this phenomenon are: Who were named? Why and when was she identified only by her name? Can the fact that a woman was named on her own be seen as a sign of either high or low social status? Which women were unnamed in the records? What do these identifying strategies communicate? To penetrate these questions, I will apply a dialogical perspective in combination with socio-onomastic aspects.

1. Introduction

A person can be identified through different means, one of which is the person’s name. Other ways of identification, especially in smaller communities, are through descriptions, such as: “the old biddy at Low Farm”, where no personal name is mentioned, only the homestead, “John Anderson’s wife” – identification through the husband, etc. These ways are valid also in urban societies today, but only in informal situations in certain contexts, e.g. “the girl with red hair in Grade 2”, “Peter’s younger sister”, “the doctor’s wife”, or to describe very well-known persons (The *Prime minister*, The *Queen*, where the title functions as name). All individuals, men or women, have their right, nowadays, to have their own and full name registered in formal and official situations, such as parish registers, judicial records etc.

Back in Early Modern Europe (i.e. during the 16th and 17th centuries), with Sweden as an example, the situation was different. Women were regarded as not full-worthy members of the official Lutheran and hierarchical society. Even though women could, and did, sue other persons, as well as stand accused at the local courts, in official records they were often denoted through husband, male relative or employer. This state of things is manifest in the parish records where, for example, in most cases only the child’s father is named in the baptismal books until late 17th century. The mother is invisible, unless she gives birth to a child out of wedlock, in which case her name is noted, perhaps as a reminder that she has been a sinner. To retrieve names of a larger part of the female population, one must seek elsewhere. One good source is the burial records, where most people, both women and men, were registered, sometimes with their own name, sometimes without. These records give a good variety of the different ways of identification, and in this paper I will mostly use them as source material.

In a dialogic perspective (Linell 2009), can those notes, or name-phrases, to use Mats Wahlberg’s term (Wahlberg 1999: 106), tell us anything about the role in society of women, and perhaps about the society in general? And what questions can we put to these documents? Some more specific questions concerning the naming of women are: who was named in the official records and who wasn’t? Is the same person mentioned in different ways in different records? Why were some unnamed?

My material consists of names and name-phrases collected from the church records from three different parishes in the southern part of Sweden, one urban, the town of Norrköping and two rural, Lyrestad in the province of Västergötland and Skedevi in Östergötland. The material dates from ca 1620 to 1660 and contains the name phrases for over 500 women whose deaths were recorded in the church books. I have also made some comparisons to the name-rendering in the contemporary taxation records.

As there were no official rules in Sweden on how to organize church records, or indeed even that such should be kept until 1686, the different vicars could manage this in their own way. This possibly makes the variation larger than after around 1690, when the keeping of parish records was officially implemented, and a certain set of regulations was distributed to all parishes (Lext 1984). This is a quite late start for official parish registration in a European perspective, and contrasts to the detailed taxation records known from Sweden from the early 1500's. One could argue that the Crown was only interested in the producing part of the population, i.e. those who could pay taxes, and not in the total population before the late 1600's. There were of course several reasons why certain vicars and bishops even long before 1686 decided to keep detailed records of their parishioners. The book-keeping and collecting of Church taxes and tithes is one. The strict Lutheranism and hierarchical society in Sweden is another, as well as the belief that all people should know their Bible, and that it was the vicar's duty to inspect this (Stadin 2004).

2. Types of name-phrases

To get an idea of what type of material we are dealing with, I will first give some examples of the different sorts of name-phrases that can be found in the burial books. The name-phrases contain one or more of several identifiers, put in italics:

1. The woman's first name (FN) : *Marit*
2. The woman's title (TI) or a descriptive word (wife, beggar, house-woman, daughter, mother): "*wife Karin*" or "*old maid*"
3. The woman's patronymic or family name (PA): "*wife Gertrud Ericksdotter*"
4. The woman's byname (BN): "*little Anna*"
5. The name of her husband (HN): "*Erik's wife*"
6. The name of her homestead/village (VN): "*wife Elsby in Toling*", "*an old wife from Huseby*"
7. The name of someone related to her, other than her husband (OR): "*Amund's mother*", "*Peter Baker's maid*"
8. Other extra-onomastic information (age, cause of death) (EX): "*Nils' sister in Hantorp who drowned, an old wife*"

The most common phrase-types are:

1. (title +) first name + (wife of) name of husband (TI) + FN + HN (wife Chirstin, Jöns Ericksen's)
2. Title + first name + village name TI + FN + VN (wife Anna in Boltorp)
3. Name of husband/father + relationship connection (wife/daughter) + village name HN/OR + TI + VN (Anders' wife in Sund)

What interests me most in these name phrases are the women that are identified without any male agent. *Male agent* is a term that I will use for the man through whom a woman is identified in an official record, as in the combinations *Wife Karin*, *Per Svensson's* or *Peter Baker's maid*, where Per Svensson and Peter Baker, respectively, are the agents. There can be female agents as well, as in *the child of Widow Brita Persdotter*, where Brita Persdotter is the agent.

Many women are registered with names in these records, but there are also many nameless women where one or several of the identifiers TI (title), HN (husband's name), VI (homestead) or (OR) other relation is used, as can be seen in examples under points 2, 5, 6 and 7 above.

It is very easy to lose oneself in the maze of different identifiers and making never-ending tables of categories, sorted in all dimensions. I will try to avoid that by just giving these examples, and then, after a short overall description of the names, concentrate on the women where no male agent is given in the name-phrase. How come that one woman who is described as “wife” is noted without her husband’s name (TI + FN), while another wife is registered just as her husband’s wife (TI + HN), with no name of her own given, on the same page of a parish book?

3. Analysis and discussion

Before starting my research on women’s name-phrases during the 17th century, I had a vague idea of what results I would find. I was pretty certain that almost all women in the early church records would be related to some man, as the patriarchal society of this time demanded that link in official records. I found, however, that the real world, as usual, was more complex. The local vicars had, as mentioned earlier, a great deal of freedom in their bookkeeping. This also shows in the methods they use for identifying their parish “sheep” in the records. There are differences, you could say, in their name awareness, and also in their name consciousness, something that leads to interesting and differing results, as the following examples will illustrate.

In the Lyrestad parish in the county of Västergötland, which housed the same vicar for 50 years, the names of almost 90 % of the dead grown-up women are noted, which is a high rate compared to other burial books as will be shown later. The vicar Johannes Benedicti seems to have had some concerns about the importance of names as he, in a burial notice from 1651, writes: “an old female beggar was taken into Lars Håkansson’s place. She fell dead as soon as she entered. Nobody knew from where she came or where she lived, or her name.” This vicar notes most of the dead women in their relationship to a male agent; those without male connections are either unmarried or house-women. (The term *house-woman* meant women living in someone else’s household, they were sometimes widows, sometimes unmarried, often old.) He is also quite conscientious in noting the homestead of the dead women, even so far as to Ingrid, the dead begging woman who came from the neighbouring parish of Fredsberg, but died in Lyrestad. His keeping of the taxation records from the 1640’s is also noteworthy by the inclusion of the names of many married women, something quite rare in that source where, as a rule, only the head of the household was named.

In my second rural parish, Skedevi, many more women are noted without name; some of those have a male agent, others don’t. Of the women whose names are noted, however, a majority is identified without any male agent. These women can be noted as e.g. “wife Brita in Sund” (TI + FN + VN) or even “wife Karin Andersdotter” (TI + FN + PA) – in the same way as most men are noted with first name and patronymic. There are also some women registered with bynames: “Tall Karin in Hageby”, “Strong-wine Karin” and “old Brita by the church”. These name-types are similar to those found in medieval records, and it’s interesting to note that they did live on for a long time in official records from rural districts.

These two parishes are rural, communities where old habits, such as using bynames in written official records, may have been supposed to stay on longer. To compare them with an urban area, I also examined the name-keeping structures in the church books of one of Sweden’s at that time bigger towns, Norrköping. This town housed several cultural and religious groups as many foreign industrial skilled workers and artisans came to live there during the 16th and 17th centuries, and could be expected to have a more modern and urban approach (Helmfrid 1971 chap. 8).

The vicar, or church clerk, in the parish of S:t Olai seems to have been less interested in noting women’s names than his contemporaries in the rural parishes. Of 130 grown-up dead women in Norrköping in the 1640’s, only 23 have got their names written down in the burial books, which is less than 20 %. A majority of the nameless women are described as

someone's wife, and there are several more relation-related epithets given, with "sister-in-law" and "mother-in-law" as the most frequent. Of the women not being family related to the man in the notice, some are described as "an old wife living at" – what could be seen as equivalent to the rural term "house-woman". Only ten women are seen as not connected to any man in the burial books. Of these, some have describing epithets or by-names like "deaf", "pious", "tall", and a couple bear professional titles. I will come back to those later on. The taxation registers give the same result as in Skedevi: very few women are noted. There is one notable exception for one year when the town's "loose women" all were noted under a specific heading. The category loose women would in this case include prostitutes as well as unmarried mothers and beggars.

The material is thus more diversified than I expected, which of course makes it more interesting. To complicate matters, there are also some name phrases, both in Norrköping and in Skedevi, where the dead person is related to a woman – a female agent. A couple of examples are "an old wife in Brita the Seamstress's house" and "an old farmhand at wife Kirstin, relic of Grels". If the mother was unmarried and the child died, the mother's name is also given, though the death notice sometimes just states: "a loose woman's child". In some cases of child death, the married mother's name is given, as in "wife Gunnil linen weaver's child". One possible explanation is that the father is dead.

To summarize my findings: women are, in a majority of cases but certainly not in all, noted with a male agent. In most cases, this man is her husband. If she is not married, it may be her employer, son, father etc. If she is noted without any male agent, her homestead is sometimes given. There are large differences between the parishes regarding if women are named or nameless in the records.

There are also big local differences between the examined parishes concerning the way women are described. This may also concern their social status. What seems to be common, and is quite easily explained, is that the so-called loose women and beggars have no male agent. They are sometimes named, sometimes nameless. Both these categories held very low positions on the social scales, and their often quite harsh living circumstances can sometimes be evoked from these short burial notices. We have "old Ingeborg, a beggar, who froze to death", and "Strong-wine Karin", who drowned. Ingeborg and Karin at least got their names preserved in contrast to the "old maid who was killed by a tree" in Skedevi.

We can safely deduce that women of low status were more likely to be noted without any man, as they in several cases were not parts of any household. But there are no straightforward ways in these records dividing low and high status women. We also have some women of decidedly higher status in the local society, married women, whose husband's name is not divulged in the notes, especially in Skedevi, e.g. "wife Karin in Lastorp, dead at childbirth". There are also some female professionals in the town of Norrköping where "Wife Catharina Caspersdotter, Midwife", stands out. Also "provision-dealer Brita" and "wife Gäska in Munkegården" are noted without male agents.

Of the women without male agent in Skedevi, at least 80 % of them are described with TI + FN + VN. There are also some nameless "old wives" whose homesteads are noted as an identification factor. In the few cases where a woman is an agent, it is obvious that she often holds higher status than the dead person, be it as mother, employer, or as married woman to an unmarried sister.

4. Concluding remarks

Are there some general features to be identified regarding the women that are being registered without male agents? As a starting point, I must stress that there are large differences between the investigated parishes. The local vicar's or scribe's varying habits is one main reason for this, and more samples drawn from a larger pool of parish books would

be needed before one could aim at any general conclusions. I will anyhow point to some findings and some possible explanations of them.

The first is that one reason for being noted without any male agent is the fact that the woman really *was* alone, judicially seen. Many of these women were of very low social status, which also shows in that quite a lot of the so-called loose women are noted without any name. On the other hand, I would like to tentatively suggest that the fact that some women of high local status were noted without male agents is because these women probably were of local good repute. The rural parishes had smaller populations and it is conceivable that women played a larger role in the daily village life than in the larger setting in Norrköping, where most women are nameless. Another factor supporting this theory is that Sweden was a country very much involved in war during the 17th century. One of the consequences of that was that many men would be away from home for years and even decades (which can be seen in the church books as well), and that their wives were obliged to take charge of the daily life at the farm (Perlestam 1997), thus becoming more active also in the village official community.

The early parish records include large parts of the population, both male and female. They were not constructed according to any given template but were kept by vicars interested in their parishioners' lives. A detailed study of them gives us more insight into the lives of common people during the 17th century and also in the way local social life was organized. However, I would like to end my paper with a specific question from the dialogic point-of-view, spun out of the fact that all the information on these women is noted down by men, and in many cases given by men. Can we in any way retrieve information about how women themselves used their names? Or is that just a pipe-dream?

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