

The Hidden Hierarchy — “Mandator” & Male Power in the Swedish State Apparatus

by Ulla Ressler

Double Power Structures within the Organizations

When one sets out to examine the reality confronting female employees in authoritarian and male-dominated work organizations in Sweden, two predominant power structures soon emerge.

The one, which I call *mandator* power, manifests itself in the general authoritarian and hierarchical structure of the work organization, that is, its non-democratic structure. It takes as its point of departure the legal right of the *mandator* — or giver of the mandate — to direct and control the direction of the work organization and its activities. This power and its exercise is for the most part formalized and visible. Its verification in law makes concealment unnecessary. The interests and objectives of this power manifest themselves clearly in the formal organizational structure — in its divisions of labour, wage structures, and divisions of responsibility and authority.

Most organizations normally reflect the pyramid structure with a broad base of female labour and a narrow and male-dominated peak. Both the more and the less tangible opportunities and rewards are disproportionately distributed among the minority of men who dominate the limited number of positions at the organization's upper levels.

The second power structure is that which defends and reinforces the relatively privileged position of the male members of the organization. In Sweden, with its gender equality principles and objectives established in law and by collective agreement, the exercise of this type of patriarchal power in defence of the particular interests of men — of male culture — can only be described as illegitimate.

This illegitimate discrimination of female culture and individual women through the defense and perpetuation of the broadest of all “old-boy-networks” —

the brotherhood of men — is exercised informally and often in the most unconscious and self-righteous manner. Its practical consequences for the subordination of women in the workplace is no less effective for that.

Level by Level Examination

I have structured the discussions which follow around the exercise of patriarchal power at three general organizational levels. They are: the secretarial or clerical level, the handling officer or middle level and the executive level. That is to say, the base, middle and top of the work organization.

What follows is a brief level by level presentation of what my own and others' research has shown to be the most persistent obstacles confronting women's opportunities for craftsmanship and career development, as distinct from those common to all employees confronted by the exercise of *mandator* power. Despite the fact that all employees, both male and female, share common frustrations and obstacles to personal development in the work organization, competition for limited opportunities and the struggle for “careerist” advancement opportunities, frequently aggravates the exercise of patriarchal power in defence of the general interests of the male core of employees within the organization.

The Secretarial Level

The designation “secretary” is used here as a summary designation for such positions as assistants, secretaries and office workers with the primary function of providing ground service to others in the organization. In Sweden, 95% of these workers are women. Their tasks are primarily determined by others. Secretaries as a group have little real influence and power over determinate aspects of condi-

tions and direction of work within the organization.

One of the most characteristic obstacles to secretaries' opportunities for development and advancement at work is the absence of a clear and regulated system for promotion and advancement into the “handling officer” level. This situation intensifies the low status of this type of job, inasmuch as it is viewed as a “dead end” or “no exit” level of the organization.

The overall work situation of secretaries is characterized by limited opportunities for promotion to other occupational levels, a short career ladder within their own groups and little opportunity for on-the-job skill development. Not surprisingly, this type of subordinate and locked-in position has a marked negative effect on self-esteem and job engagement.

Patriarchal Control at the Secretarial Level

A further general characteristic of the secretarial work situation is the direct, personal and predominantly male control of opportunities and working conditions. The members of the executive and handling officer levels which continue to be either predominantly or exclusively male, have a great deal of scope for arbitrary, personal influence over the assignment of tasks, the use and distribution of secretarial time, rewards, wage increases, support, sponsorship and increased advancement opportunities.

At this level in the organization, job descriptions are frequently very general and vaguely formulated. Formal qualifications and requirements are not given particularly high priority. Such conditions make it easier for superiors to evaluate a secretary on the basis of what he thinks of her as a person rather than objectively evaluating her qualifications. Being liked by the boss is often what determines wage increases and career development oppor-

tunities.

The Handling Officer Level

The handling officer level within the organization is often characterized by relatively good opportunities for upward mobility in the hierarchy. Skill and personal development as well as career and advancement opportunities increase dramatically at this level.

It is not uncommon among this group to see colleagues be promoted. Beginning at the handling officer level, employees become eligible and part of an upward winding spiral of opportunities. There is, indeed, pressure to move upwards.

A closer examination of this group, however, reveals that female handling officers are not embraced by this upward spiral to the same extent as their male co-workers. In explaining this phenomenon it is necessary to examine the ratio of women to men at this level. Within the Swedish public administration, this ratio is roughly 25% women and 75% men. Men dominate this level of the organization. This results in the domination of male norms throughout the organization. Consequently, it is a common experience for substantially more experienced and competent women to be bypassed as younger and less experienced men are promoted. Why does this happen? Essentially, it is because it is the men who have control, influence and access to necessary contact networks and information channels that lead to advancement opportunities.

Authoritarian (undemocratic) organizational structures create insecurity, competition, fear, anxiety and the subsequent need for more stringent control from the perspective of management. This becomes increasingly clear the higher up the hierarchy one goes. One method of reducing uncertainty and increasing control is to ensure that one is surrounded by co-workers of "the same social category." There is no shortage of evidence that social and cultural similarity (conformity) is of tremendous importance among executives.

In most cases, executives prefer to have socially and culturally similar subordinates. These more easily recognizable and identifiable types receive the most help forward and upward in the organization. This bureaucratic familiarity

or homosociality results in the reproduction and perpetuation of successful subordinates who correspond to the (male) self-image of the executive sponsor.

In order to be fully accepted by and receive the encouragement and sponsorship of the men who monopolize and dominate the higher executive levels, one should therefore, whether man or woman, behave as they do, look as they do, think as they do, be one of them and remain loyal to their values and ideas. It is this duplicate cultural and social behaviour which is at the core of being considered loyal and reliable — one of the team. Not surprisingly, women are in a disadvantaged position under such conditions. This is the kind of concealed or informal obstacle confronting women at the middle level of the organization.

Under such conditions of male cultural, social and political dominance within the work organization, it is for male and even female colleagues and superiors to conclude that individual women have only themselves to blame. The structural underpinnings of this situation are seldom considered.

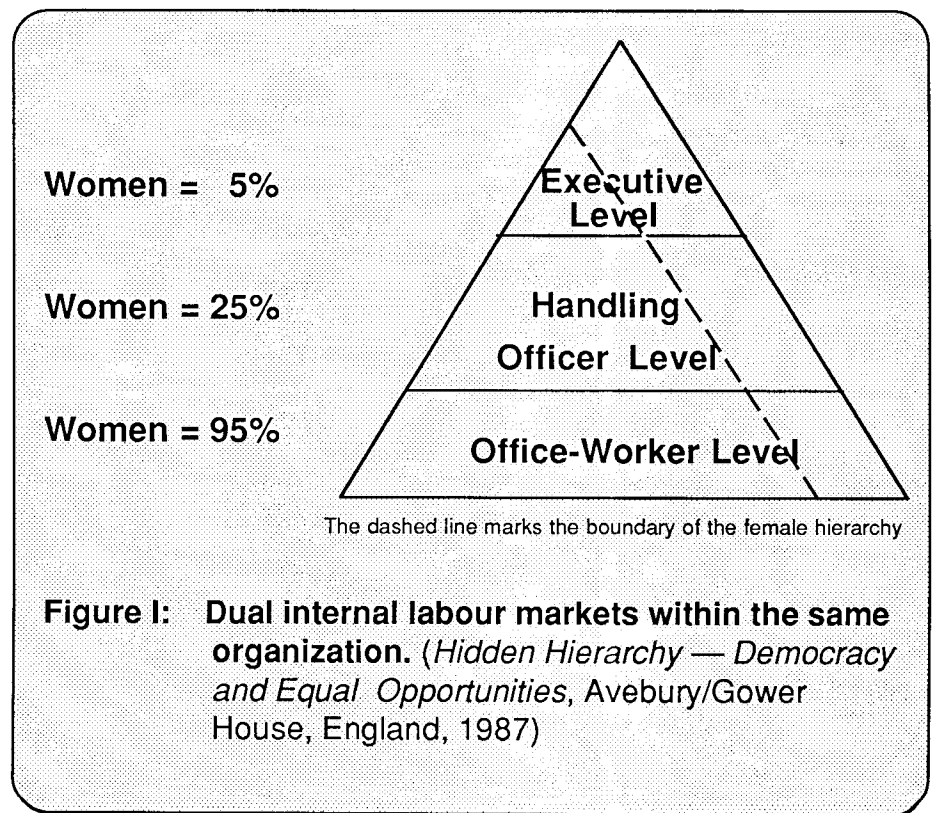
The Executive Level

A few women, despite all obstacles, are promoted to executive positions. The

mere fact that there are so few of them has serious negative consequences for the individual women. They almost invariably find themselves alone. Men at this level are in the company of other men. They constitute the clear majority. A woman executive on the other hand is most often the sole female in an otherwise exclusively male and highly competitive group. This extreme numerical disproportionality results in marked differences in their work lives.

Women's situation at the executive level is often similar to that of an ethnic minority or handicapped employees. From a socio-psychological perspective one can distinguish three primary tendencies in situations with a small minority working side by side with a totally dominant majority:

Visibility and Exposure, or the "spotlight" effect is one consequence of being a minority in such situations. This type of minority visibility tends to create unreasonable performance pressure on female executives. They must constantly demonstrate that they are competent and deserve the position they have been given. They must continually defend their existence as executives to quite a different degree than their male colleagues.



LÉLIA YOUNG

Nostalgie

Le jour s'est retiré
 dans un lit de plumes
 sans que la leçon
 des siècles laborieux
 ne fût en nos mains annexée
 Un rythme survivant
 séjourne dans nos veines
 le rythme d'un langage
 non approprié
 Dans le roulis oriental
 des vagues épuisées
 baigne mon esprit
 Le chant marin ramène avec lui
 le dialecte savoureux
 des grands-parents partis
 au jadis de l'enfance
 et le sable durci prend avec lui
 les couleurs odorantes
 Il faut
 un contact avec la nostalgie
 pour ressusciter le foisonnement
 des lumières
 dans le jeu nocturne de l'éveil

Renaitre

Passer par les rayons
 de candeur et d'ombre solitaire
 passer par une secousse
 qui unifie la main et l'argile
 en un lieu traversant
 la membrane translucide
 d'un nouveau monde
 Cacher un cœur chancelant
 à des gestes tremblants
 qui traduisent la lenteur à devenir autre
 Manoeuvrer pour laisser agir la beauté
 silencieusement à l'abri du regard autre
 sous lequel elle prend doucement
 son essor
 Apprivoisée mourir au côté d'une onde
 et renaître de source sienne et inconnue
 Le chemin est à sens unique
 la lumière pénètre avec peine
 le mur s'est fissuré

Exclusion or Non-membership means that simultaneous with this high visibility, female executives are often totally excluded from the informal male collective and clubs at this level. They are often excluded as well from the informal contact network, information channels, tips, favours and counter-favours, support and sponsorship which are such an important aspect of communications and influence at this executive level.

Stereotyping, in this context, means that individual women in such settings are often viewed as representatives of the majority of women and not simply as individuals doing a job. By this means, individual women are often attributed a large number of characteristics which are viewed by men as typically female. This reluctance to assess an individual woman's particular competence and uniqueness often goes hand in hand with a depreciating and condescending attitude, further aggravating her marginality as a member of the executive team.

The Development of Two Gender Related Hierarchies Within the Same Organization

Looking at the conditions facing male and female employees at all levels of the work organization, a pattern begins to emerge. Two informal hierarchies or dual internal labour markets develop within one and the same organization.

The female hierarchy reaches its peak at the periphery of the organization's power centre with primary responsibility for what may be termed the organization's social structure. Women in these executive positions frequently function as the management's social workers.

The male hierarchy embraces in the first instance the economic and production structure of the organization with near or complete monopoly over the most powerful and influential positions at the executive level.

The social structure in the organization is always subordinate to the needs and requirements of the economic or production structure dominated by men. Using the case of the Swedish public sector during the 1980s, time and again the social structure of these organizations (which

are responsible for such things as education, training and personnel) is given consistently lower priority during cutbacks as compared to the economic structure of the organization. Budget restrictions hit hardest in the areas of work environment and education while there appears to be no limit to the amount of money available for new technology and expensive management training courses and programs. Thus, women's generally subordinate position becomes institutionalized through this functional division of labour.

In conclusion, I would suggest that work organizational studies which do not develop a theoretical and methodological sensitivity to the particular conditions of female labour throughout the organization do themselves a serious disservice. Only when workplace studies address the issue of gender-specific problems — as well as problems common to all workers in hierarchical work organizations — will the conditions of women workers be substantially improved.

Sources

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