

Gender inequality and its quandaries for an anthropologist making films about women

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Short Abstract

Looking back at my own history as an anthropologist and ethnographic filmmaker, I will reflect on the issue of gender inequality, and the qualms and quandaries it raises when an anthropologist makes films about women.

Long Abstract

In the early 1970s, when the Women's Liberation Movement got under way, I tried to make sense of gender inequalities while doing fieldwork in Hamar, Southern Ethiopia. In the same period Robert Gardner made *Rivers of Sand*, an unashamedly biased view of gender relations in Hamar (in an interview Gardner admitted he "especially disliked Hamar men"). As an anthropologist I was not happy with this film and faced the following quandary: gender relations in Hamar seemed unfair to me, and yet women were the ones who most vigorously endorsed gender inequality. When I came to make my own films (the Hamar Trilogy and Duka's Dilemma), I was determined not to be judgemental, but to ask Hamar women to explain the whys and wherefores of their gender relations. Through filming I came to appreciate the advantages Hamar women gain from a gender division of labour, reproduction, defence, etc. and why they foster gender inequality as a way of gaining sway over their menfolk. Now I face another quandary: my films may shed light on gender relations, but they also provide fuel for governmental and nongovernmental organizations to intervene in the name of gender inequality, and oblige women to abandon their traditional practices. This undermines their time-honoured mode of sustainable subsistence, and leaves the women with no way of harnessing the support of their menfolk to cope with the exigencies of life. But if I advocate that women should decide themselves what kind of gender relations to cultivate, am I an anti-feminist?

Notes about my talk

When considering gender inequality I have in mind three core areas of focus which the UN Women identify as "**freedom from violence, gender equality in capabilities and resources, and gender equality in decision-making power and voice**". (Petroni, Suzanne. 31 May 2013. "Adolescent girls critical to post-2015 agenda" International Center for Research on Women).

In the 1970s I read Shulamith Firestone's amazing book *The Dialectic of Sex*. At the beginning of the book she wrote "Until a certain level of evolution had been reached and technology had achieved its present sophistication, to question fundamental biological conditions was insanity. Why should woman give up her precious seat in the cattle car for a bloody struggle she could not hope to win?" (Firestone, Shulamith. 1970. *The Dialectic of Sex* Paladin:London p.11)

Following the same line of thought as regards the Hamar of southern Ethiopia, I would say: Why should Hamar women give up their gender roles, which they have created for themselves through negotiation with their menfolk, and which foster gender inequality in exchange for male commitment to their struggle for survival, which on their own they could not hope to win? Gender inequalities regarding violence (wife beating), capabilities (married women don't milk cows, married men

don't grind grain) and resources (men own livestock, but they can only acquire them via their wives and sisters), decision-making (women are excluded from men's public meetings but meet and act on issues concerning women alone) and voices (men dominate discussions while women use indirect ways to get their voice heard).

In the 1970s when I did ethnographic fieldwork and had my first two children, I was an angry young woman irritated by the gender inequalities that I experienced myself, and those I witnessed in Hamar. I separated from and divorced my husband and tried to finish my PhD in England while being a single parent. This led me to appreciate traditional gender relations with their inequalities that bound males to females in the pursuit of not only making a living, but also a home and social life.

The bizarre custom of Hamar women demanding to be whipped when one of their male relatives is initiated into manhood shocks and intrigues all outsiders who witness it in action. When making films about Hamar women they helped me understand the why they supported this tradition and kept it going. Basically it is a powerful rhetorical way of expressing love to their brothers and cousins, and persuading them to love and care for them in return. The relationship between a woman and her brothers and cousins is central to the kinship that provides a network of security for women and their children.

When my husband made films in Hamar, I was able to assist him, for example by taking the sound, but when I wanted to make films I could not change our unequal gender roles and have him assist me, and I doing the directing. It could be a question of personalities, but these are also shaped by gender. When making *The women who smile* I worked with an all female film crew. I found the experience very liberating. We had our different tasks, I as anthropologist, Joanna Head as director, Nina Kellgren as camera woman, Debbie Kaplan as sound recordist and Alexandra, the camera assistant, and we worked as a team with little hierarchy. We discussed our experience, the others saying how they normally feel discriminated against when working with men. We celebrated being women and the different kind of film we were making. We all agreed that we were not feminists who we understood would be fighting to be equal to men in every respect. We suggested we were just feminine. I think what we experienced was similar to what Jane Austin experienced as a writer. We had the opportunity to make films independently from male colleagues, and thus we produced a different product with different interests and perspectives. We experienced something similar to what Hamar women experience with their gender division of labour and spheres of responsibility.

In answer to the question, can there be a feminist visual anthropology, I would propose that this is not possible if it involves elimination of gender inequalities. Instead what we can enjoy is gendered visual anthropology.