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## The gendered aspects of the strong region discourse: New subject positions for non-traditional actors or business as usual?

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# **The Gendered Aspects of the Strong Region Discourse – New Subject Positions for Non-Traditional Actors or Business as Usual?**

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## **The Gendered Aspects of the Strong Region Discourse – New Subject Positions for Non-Traditional Actors or Business as Usual?**

[This paper is still very much in a process of becoming. All comments gratefully received!]

### **Introduction**

The move towards governance and the concomitant the growth of neo-liberalism have had a profound effect on regional policy in Sweden. In much the same way as we have seen the development of the concept of the *active citizen* associated with neo-liberalism (Rose 1999) where citizens are constituted as self-governing, responsible subjects (Newman 2005), we have seen the rise of the *active region* responsible for its own well-being and growth. Emphasis is placed on the need for individual actors, both citizens and businesses, to utilize their opportunities to facilitate the region's economic growth and become a strong region. Thus, since the 1990s, Swedish regional policy has moved from being a highly centralized, national government regional policy closely associated with the social democratic aim of levelling out territorial differences and aiding lagging or declining regions to a more decentralized, neo-liberal policy focusing increasingly on promoting growth in the whole country (Hudson & Rönnblom 2007, Hudson 2009). There is a powerful rhetoric of inclusion – of all being needed in the struggle to be successful and achieve economic growth.

In this discourse of “strong regions” with active, entrepreneurial citizens, what spaces and subject positions are being created for those who do not fit the strong region image? What happens to those not usually associated with economic growth? Are new spaces opening up for the silent in regional policies? What identities are being constituted for, for example, declining rural regions and non-traditional regional actors such as women's groups, immigrants and ethnic minorities? What are the consequences of this? Are these groups being constructed as active subjects able to influence and shape regional policies or as the passive objects of policies? Using Carol Bacchi's the ‘What's the Problem? Approach’ (Bacchi 1999, 2009), these questions will be explored in relation to regional policy in Sweden, focusing mainly on the gendered consequences. The paper also draws on governance theory and concept of the active citizen in understanding these processes. The analysis is based on government policy documents and reports concerning regional policy between 1993 and 2009.

The paper is structured as follows. It begins by presenting the ‘what's the problem represented to be? approach’, it then charts the rise of the neo-liberal strong region discourse, followed by a discussion of the active regional citizen and then gender-equality as a driving force for regional growth. Next the consequences of the gender-equality as growth discourse for women and other ‘Others’ are discussed and finally some tentative conclusions are presented.

### **The What's the Problem Represented to be? Approach**

Carol Bacchi's ‘what's the problem represented to be? approach’ to policy analysis (Bacchi 1999; 2009) is used to enable focus to be placed on *how* arguments concerning the new forms of regional policy are assigning different categories of people different subject positions; in particular, what kind of subject positions are

being given to women as a group? (See also Hudson & Rönnblom 2007). Who benefits and who loses from the way of seeing the world imposed by the dominant regional discourse i.e. what are the effects of the discourse? Based on Foucault, Bacchi (2009, page 15) identifies three interconnected and overlapping kinds of effects. Firstly, there are the *discursive effects* which follow from the limits imposed on what can be said and who can say it, when and where and with what authority (Ball 1990, Bacchi 1999) and what is left silent. Thus “the problem representations and the discourses that frame them make it difficult to think differently” (Bacchi 2009, page 16) closing off and leaving alternative ways unexplored. Secondly, there are the *subjectification effects* i.e. the ways in which subjects and subjectivities are constituted in discourse. Discourses make certain subject positions available – stigmatizing some (for example, as ‘needy’ or ‘disadvantaged’) and “exonerating others and keeping change within limits” (Bacchi 2009 page 42). Bacchi draws attention to dividing practices, for example, unemployed versus employed and how these can create members of the targeted groups as responsible for the problem. This may work to disempower those targeted, drawing attention away from the gendered, racialized and disabling structures which shape the possibilities of their lives and reinforce the existing power relations. Thirdly, there are what Bacchi calls the *lived effects* i.e. the *material* impact of problem representations. Policy representations of problems have “effects *in the real* by materially affecting our lives” (Bacchi 2009 page 18). In this paper, it is mainly the *discursive* and the *subjectification* effects that will be discussed.

### **The rise of the Strong Region Discourse**

The economic crisis in Sweden during the 1990s, coupled with the increasing influence of neo-liberalism and the shift towards governance led to a fundamental reconsideration of the aim of regional policy. It changed from being something that was just for ‘problem’ regions (resource equalization) to a more neo-liberal discourse on achieving economic growth in the whole country through developing strong, responsible and entrepreneurial, regions. These changes have been seen as being so far reaching as to constitute a paradigm shift in the way regional policy is viewed in Sweden (Nutek 2004a; NUTEK 2004b; Lindström 2005). A number of themes can be identified running through the policy documents and government reports from the early 1990s to today. These include: an emphasis on achieving sustainable growth (particularly in economic terms); on decentralizing regional policy and creating strong regions able to take responsibility for their own well-being and development; on active, entrepreneurial citizens; on inclusion – that women and men, young and old, immigrants are needed in achieving growth; and on gender equality as a driving force for regional growth. These themes weave in and out of each other – sometimes contradictory but mostly reinforcing the emphasis on economic growth.

Turning first to the growth issue; an emphasis on regional policy as a means for achieving economic growth becomes increasingly apparent from the 1990s onwards. An early example is the 1993 Labour Market Department report entitled *A Growth Promoting Regional Policy (En tillväxtfrämjande regionalpolitik)* (Ds 1993:78) which formed the basis for the Whitepaper *Settlements and Regions in Development (Bygder och regioner i utveckling)* (Prop. 1993/94:140). These documents argue that the original focus of regional policy on aiding lagging or declining rural regions, particularly in Northern Sweden, was no longer appropriate. What was needed was a regional policy that embraced all the country’s regions as it was no longer clear which

regions might be growth regions in the future and that high growth in a few regions was insufficient to achieve national economic growth. Further, the whitepaper states that regional policy should be formulated from a gender perspective and “explicitly take into account that there are both women and men in the country’s regions” (Prop. 1993/94:140 page 31). This move towards governance i.e. from a highly centrally steered regional policy to a more decentralized policy in which responsibility is passed to the regions themselves and attention drawn to gender, appears to be opening up new spaces for and allowing in new actors in the formulation of regional policy. In terms of Bacchi’s *discursive effects*, this seems to offer the potential for non-traditional regional actors to ‘speak’ (and perhaps to be ‘heard’?) in the formulation of regional policy.

The whitepaper *Regional growth – for work and welfare* (Prop. 1997/8:62) introduced a new *regional business development and enterprise policy* (*regional näringspolitik*) and argued that economic growth and competitiveness in Sweden would be increased by making better use of the growth potential in all regions. This was to be achieved through a more decentralized regional business development and enterprise policy better adapted to local and regional circumstances. Stress was placed on regions themselves taking responsibility and it argued that:

“every region needs to utilize its assets and, in this way, strengthen its competitiveness” ...and “stimulate a sustainable economic development that can contribute to more and expanding businesses and thereby increase employment for both *women* and *men*” (Prop. 1997/98: 62, page 1, my emphasis).

It introduced regional growth agreements (*tillväxtavtal*) as an important tool for achieving the goals of the new regional policy. National government was to sign a broad development ‘contract’ with each region which, in return, would get a greater say in the disposition of both the Swedish and EU resources designated for the region – its ‘growth capital’ (Hudson 2005). The agreements were to:

“be guided by the demands of business and the local and regional requirements for measures to promote growth and employment. The involvement of representatives for business and industry is crucial. *Gender equality between women and men* as well as social and ecological aspects should be taken into consideration. The agreements should also promote sustainable development.” (Proposition 1997/98:62, p. 203, my emphasis).

A new form of organization, regional partnership, was also introduced to work with the growth agreements. The partnerships were to have a broad membership of regional stakeholders from all sectors including local, regional and national government, higher education institutions with particular prominence given to the inclusion of business representatives (Prop. 1997/98: 62; Ds 1999: 32). However, it was emphasized that other interests such as voluntary organizations, women’s groups (particularly the regional resource centres for women) and other representatives of civil society could and should also be invited “as sustainable growth can only be obtained when everyone’s ability and competence is utilized” (Ds 1999: 32 page 5). This, together with the fact that gender-equality (together with environmental considerations) was to be a horizontal goal that permeated all the work with the growth agreements seems to strengthen the salience of gender in regional policy. Thus these developments seem to be extending the possibilities for women (as a group) to be constructed as active subjects able to influence and shape the regional

discourse (cf Bacchi's *subjectification effects*) rather than just the passive recipients or objects of regional policies and measures.

The dominance of the growth and competitiveness perspective is even clearer in the subsequent white paper *A Policy for Growth and Vitality in the Whole Country* (Prop. 2001/2: 4). Here regional policy and regional business development and enterprise policy are amalgamated to form a new regional *development* policy (*regional utvecklingspolitik*) (Prop. 2001/2: 4 page 100) and the regional growth agreements are transformed into regional growth programmes. The reason given for having a regional development policy that applies to all parts of the country is that national growth is comprised of the sum of the growth that is created locally and regionally. Thus national growth as a whole is dependent on how well the potential for growth found locally and regionally is utilized. The need to create strong regions is emphasized and responsibility is clearly shifted to the regions themselves and the individuals in them. However, these individuals are presented in gender-neutral terms as:

“local and regional actors who have the greatest knowledge about their regions and thus also which measures are the most appropriate for achieving long-term sustainable regional development” (Prop. 2001/2: 4, Page 119).

Further, examples are: “Growth is created at the local and regional level by people in businesses” (Prop 2001/2: 4, page 6) and “people’s willingness and opportunities to develop are decisive for Sweden’s possibilities for continue economic growth” (Prop 2001/2: 4, page 33). Nevertheless, the whitepaper is very critical, drawing on previous evaluations of the growth agreements (see Ds 2000: 7 and Ds 2001: 15)<sup>1</sup>, of the failure to include a gender perspective in the growth agreements. It is interesting to note that the way in which gender-equality is to be incorporated changes in the growth programmes. Sustainable growth is conceptualized in terms of three, supposedly equal dimensions - economic, ecological and social. Instead of being a horizontal goal to be integrated throughout the whole of the policy field, gender-equality is subsumed into the social dimension of sustainable growth (Hudson & Rönnblom 2007). Further, despite the increasing formulation of growth as sustainable growth comprising economic, ecological and social dimensions, the economic dimension dominates. Indeed as Rönnblom (2009) points out:

“Ecological growth and social growth are constructed as results of economic growth – not as dimensions of parallel importance. This hierarchical ordering shrinks – and bends – the integration of gender equality to a consequence of economic growth, whereby economic growth is regarded as gender-neutral” (Rönnblom 2009, page ?).

These developments have implications in terms of both Bacchi's *discursive effects* in that the subsuming of gender-equality into the social dimension seems to be closing off and limiting the way in which gender-equality can be framed (cf. Rönnblom 2009) and *subjectification effects* in that economic growth is presented as gender neutral. It is interesting to note that evaluations of the inclusion of gender-equality in the regional programmes after this change become less and less critical. As Rönnblom (2009) remarks the fifth evaluation of the programmes (NUTEK 2005c), has despite its focus on sustainable growth, only a limited discussion of gender equality. The report's main comments concern the lack of women in the regional partnerships but

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<sup>1</sup> The subsequent evaluations Ds 2002: 34 and Ds 2003: 43 were also critical.

it states that issues concerning gender equality are, nevertheless, quite well integrated in the regional growth programmes. However, as Rönblom (2009) points out, the women in the partnerships seem to be more hesitant than the men to come to this conclusion. This finding holds for the subsequent evaluations (see NUTEK 2006; NUTEK 2007c; NUTEK 2008), where gender-equality is discussed largely in terms of being the best integrated of the three sustainability aspects (i.e. environmental, gender-equality and integration aspects). The only deviation from this is with regard to the inclusion of Regional Resource Centres for Women. Here it is considered that, while the inclusion of representation from the centres has helped women to gain access to the regional partnerships, it has not enabled them to influence the content of the regional programmes. Thus to reformulate the old Victorian adage concerning children - women should be seen but not heard. In terms of Bacchi's *subjectification effects*, the representatives from Regional Resource Centres for Women have been constructed as 'peripheral'. This helps to limit challenges to, or changes in, the existing gendered and racialized regional power relations that might otherwise have followed from the inclusion of representatives from the Resource Centres in the regional partnerships.

Even more telling are possibly the evaluations of the Regional Development Programmes (RUP)<sup>2</sup>. The RUPs were introduced in parallel with the regional growth programmes both with the aim of achieving better sectoral co-ordination and as an expression of the emphasis that the Government wished to be placed on sustainable development. In RUP, the economic focus was to be:

“complemented with the necessary and hitherto missing ecological and social perspective on regional development” (NUTEK 2007d)

However, despite this pronounced emphasis on sustainable development, gender-equality is notable largely for its absence both in this report and in the subsequent evaluation of RUP (see Tillyväxtverket 2009). In terms of Bacchi's *discursive effects*, this silence closes off and makes it difficult for alternative ways of conceptualizing regional growth to be explored.

The most recent shift in regional policy can be found in the Government Budget Bill for 2007/8. Under the expenditure heading 19 Regional Development, a new policy for regional growth is introduced and regional development policy is renamed Regional *growth* policy (Prop. 2007/08:1 page 11). This is to be sustainable “i.e. it will contribute to enabling current and future generations of women and men to be offered sound economic, social and environmental conditions” (ibid page 15). However, the emphasis is largely in terms of economic growth. “A new policy for growth in the whole country must be given a clear focus specifically on *growth*.” (ibid page 38, my italics). The government states its intention is to pursue an “active renewal policy that will give all parts of the country opportunity to develop on the basis of their own strength and contribute to the collective good” (ibid page 38). The emphasis on economic growth can be seen in that the growth potential in the whole country is to be improved by strengthening local and regional competitiveness and creating better conditions for business, innovation and investment. The policy states explicitly that:

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<sup>2</sup> These were introduced in the whitepaper *A Policy for Growth and Vitality in the Whole Country* (Prop. 2001/2: 4).

“The policy for regional growth builds on that each region is given responsibility and powers that provide the possibility to grow on the basis of their own preconditions. Sweden’s growth is nothing more than the sum of the growth that is created in all parts of the country”. ... More strong regions are also good for Sweden’s weak regions. (Prop. 2007/08:1 page 38).

The weak regions are portrayed as the small rural regions, particularly in northern Sweden, that are trailing behind their European counterparts, whereas the large urban regions are portrayed in terms of dynamism, creativity, innovation and growth. This can be seen as an example of what Bacchi (2009) calls dividing practices whereby, through juxtaposing the weak regions with the strong, the small, rural regions are implicitly responsible for their own weaknesses. The heavy emphasis on economic growth also has *discursive effects* in that it constrains and limits the way in which regional growth can be conceptualized.

### **The Active Regional Citizen**

Turning to who can be the active subject participating in formulating regional policy, leads into a discussion of the active regional citizen. The neo-liberal concept of the ‘active’ citizen is closely linked to the processes of governance whereby power is dispersed beyond and within the state and “the image of a hierarchical relationship between state and citizen ... is displaced by the idea of multiple parallel spaces in which power is encountered and negotiated” (Newman 2005 page 4). Further, Newman (2005) suggests that this dispersal of power opens up new ways in which citizens can engage in the politics of localities and regions. The active citizen exercises responsibility and participates not just in the public sphere “but in a variety of private, corporate and quasi-public practices from working to shopping” (Rose 1999, page 166), and is constituted as a self-governing, responsible subject. However, the transformation of citizenship to a more active performing subject is profoundly gendered and racialized (Newman 2005). Regulatory practices become intertwined with the new modes of provision of welfare that work not only to constrain individual behaviour but also to define and limit subjectivities (Newman 2005, page 92) The shift from welfare to neo-liberal citizenship regimes (Lister et al 2007) has been seen as having a profound effect on women’s citizenship. The ‘good’ citizen is the active, working citizen (Lister 2003). The “de-gendering” of the active citizen i.e. women as worker-citizens become “equal” with men as worker-citizens (Newman 2005), means that women in general are being made “invisible” i.e. they “seemingly ‘disappear’ or fall off of the political radar” (Dobrowolsky 2008, page 466). I argue here that the neoliberal discourse of active citizen is being translated in to the “active region” in the same way as, under new ways of governing the social, “citizens are expected (or themselves expect) to play more active roles in handling risks and promoting their own welfare” (Johansson & Hvinden 2005 page 101).

It becomes increasingly clear from the Swedish regional policy documents and reports that active regions require active citizens. Interestingly, the gender-neutral tones of, for example, the whitepaper *Policy for Growth and Vitality in the Whole Country* discussed above of “people in businesses” and “people’s willingness and opportunities to develop” are later ‘embodied’. For example, the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (NUTEK 2004a) argues that:

“Sustainable economic development and strong regions are dependent on individuals being given the prerequisites to enable them to realize their ideas and



innovations. The concept of multiplicity is, therefore, central even in the work with regional development. By multiplicity is meant a multiplicity of persons with regard to *gender, ethnicity, experience, age and sexuality*" (NUTEK 2004a page 25, my emphasis).

This appears to be opening up for non-traditional regional actors to participate in the regional discourse, in terms of Bacchi's *discursive effects*, for the silent to speak and, in terms of *subjectification effects*, for new subject positions to possibly become available to them.

The need for active citizens becomes even more pronounced when regional policy becomes regional *growth* policy. Under section 19 of the Budget Bill for 2008 (Prop. 2007/08:1) dealing with regional development, it is stated that regional growth policy is to be adapted to regional conditions in order for individuals and businesses to work better and to be successful and utilize the development potential and dynamics where they live and work. Interestingly, a requirement for this is that:

"*women and men, regardless of ethnic and cultural background or sexuality should have the same opportunities to develop in all parts of the country. Systems that conserve the distribution of power and resources from these perspectives will be counteracted*" (Prop. 2007/08:1 page 38, my emphasis)

However, despite the radical nature of the latter part of this quote, no suggestions are made in the Budget Bill or later Bills, as to how the present gendered, racialized and sexualized power relations are to be counteracted. Indeed this idea is not developed in the later government report *Regions at work for increased growth* (NUTEK 2007a) evaluating the work with the regional growth programmes. This instead shifts the focus back to a 'genderless' individual who should actively work for growth i.e. regional growth policy should be based on individuals' own activity:

"Actors at regional and local level will be given even greater influence over – and responsibility for – achieving growth. The Government will strengthen growth potential by creating better conditions for business, innovation and investment... The value of the improved conditions always falls back on individual actors .... Sweden's collected development potential depends on how well citizens and businesses utilize their unique opportunities" NUTEK (2007a, page 4)

This suggests that the challenge to the dominant power relations inherent in the earlier quotes has, once again, been silenced in this new representation of the problem of achieving growth (cf. Bacchi's *discursive effects*). Nevertheless, there is also (a competing?) discourse linking gender-equality with growth in general and emphasizing its importance for regional growth. Whilst this discourse in many ways risks essentializing women in terms of their possessing the "right" characteristics for the new economy (e.g. flexibility, communication skills, networking etc), it may also open up new opportunities for women as a group to be ascribed more active subject positions. This will be considered in the next section.

### **Gender-Equality as a Driving Force for Regional Growth**

Prior to the 1990s, regional policy had largely ignored women (see Hudson 2008; Hudson & Rönnblom 2007) and from the late 1980s onwards, there was mounting criticism of regional policy's 'one-eyedness' (see Friberg 1993; Bull 2001) which saw only men. Women both inside and outside the formal political arena, began to lobby for the inclusion of a 'woman's perspective' (Hudson & Rönnblom 2007). Attention

was drawn to the male dominance in regional politics, both concerning the kind of policies that were prioritised, and the overwhelming predominance of men involved in actually forming these policies. A critical study of regional policy carried out by Friberg (1993) highlighted the highly gender segregated labour market. It pointed out that regional policy's almost total focus on male dominated branches meant that the problems and requirements of female occupations were rendered invisible. In particular, the difficulties facing women in sparsely populated, rural areas with regard to the labour market and earning their living were ignored.

In the knowledge and information based economy, increasing importance is ascribed to human capital. In Sweden, women's economic activity rates are not far below those of men.<sup>3</sup> They are employed predominantly in the service sector, which, according to the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (NUTEK)<sup>4</sup>, now makes a more important contribution to the country's growth than manufacturing (NUTEK 2005b). Further, according to government reports, women as a group are extending their knowledge skills to a greater extent than men as a group<sup>5</sup>, thus "Trends indicate that women have broadened their educational and employment choices to a greater degree than men." (Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications 2007, page 19) and that this is seen as likely to become even more pronounced in the future as "women continue into higher education in greater numbers than men" (Näringsdepartementet 2009, page 34).

"Specifically, women as a group have a higher level of education and are more likely than men to continue learning throughout their working lives, which makes them attractive on a labour market undergoing rapid transformation" (NUTEK 2002, page 25).

These developments are seen as underlining the importance of women's productive role. Indeed it has been argued that what are often described as typically 'women's skills', such as networking and co-operation, mean that they are well equipped to meet the requirements of the new economy (NUTEK 2004a, page 18), and are at an advantage in the more subtle management style required in the new economy where people and communication skills are at a premium (see Leidner 1991).<sup>6</sup> This could be seen as an example of what Bacchi (1999) calls 'lived-effects'. Women as a category become commodified; their labour power and expertise are commodities to be brought and sold in the market. At the same time, women's reproductive role is also presented as important as they continue to take the lion's share of the responsibility for the care and nurture of the young, the old and the sick. Thus women as a group are ascribed economic importance through both their productive and reproductive roles. Skjeie & Borchorst (2003) have drawn attention to how gender-equality is increasingly being expressed in terms of a rhetoric of profitability. Put simply: women + production = efficiency (Hudson 2008).

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<sup>3</sup> According to *Statistics Sweden* 2008, they were 81% for women and 87% for men aged 20-64 in 2007

<sup>4</sup> Since 2009 part of Tillväxtverket.

<sup>5</sup> 47% women and 38% men, aged 25-44 had post-secondary education in Sweden in 2007 (*Statistics Sweden* 2008).

<sup>6</sup> There is obviously a risk of essentializing women. Why, for example, should women be 'innately' better at communicating than men?

“When gender-equality is argued as a means to secure competitiveness, the category of ‘women’ accordingly becomes a representation of ‘means’ for companies and organizations to use.” (Skjeie & Borchorst 2003, page 7).

In the neo-liberal growth discourse, gender-equality becomes a product that can be packaged and marketed in achieving regional development (See Hudson 2008). The idea of using gender-equality as a means for improving regional competitiveness has begun to feature more frequently in relation to government directives for regional policy. The Government guidelines for the regional growth programmes from 2002, for example, state:

“In order to create the conditions for an increase in the number of entrepreneurs and businesses, it is important to encourage a positive attitude towards entrepreneurship in both women and men and to promote a climate in which individual’s entrepreneurial skills, regardless of sex, can be utilized and developed.” (Näringslivsdepartement 2002, page 10)

This connection continues to be made, for example on the Ministry for Integration and Gender Equality homepage, it states that equality between women and men is an important factor for growth:

“Gender equality also contributes to economic growth by promoting people’s skills and creativity.” (Ministry for Integration and Gender Equality 2010) (<http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/4096> 2010-03-31)

and the *National Strategy for Regional Competitiveness, Entrepreneurship and Employment 2007-2013* declares that:

“Special focus must be placed on equality between women and men, integration and diversity, and environmental issues. Equality between women and men must be promoted at all levels” (Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications 2007 page 39).

Government agencies and ministries have also promoted this idea. The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (NUTEK) in its report on creating strong regions argues that:

“Promoting a change in traditional gender roles, so that women are increasingly able to share the benefits of regional enlargement, has an intrinsic value and can also strengthen the competitiveness of trade and industry.” (NUTEK 2002, page 26)

and in a publication from the then Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communication on regional processes and co-operation in relation to achieving sustainable growth, there is a section headed:

“Gender-equality – a prerequisite for growth” (Näringsdepartementet 2004, page 24)

The report states explicitly that a gender-equal society is an important factor for sustainable development. There is an idea that everyone is needed and in this way nothing is wasted. “Equality between women and men contributes to economic growth though everyone’s skills and creativity being utilized” (Näringsdepartementet 2009, page 39). However, what are the consequences of the coupling of gender-

equality to growth? Does it just serve to essentialize women? Does it turn them into a resource that can be utilized? Or does it also open up for new spaces and subjectivities in the regional policy discourse? The next section will consider these issues.

### **Consequences of the Gender-Equality for Growth Discourse for Women and Other ‘Others’?**

Drawing on Bacchi’s *discursive* and *subjectification* effects, the consequences for non-traditional regional actors will be considered.

The reports and policy documents concerning regional policy studied here point out that there are considerable differences between regions in terms of their preconditions for creating growth. Further, there has been an increasing polarization between regions with growth taking place mainly in the major city regions whilst the weakest regions are the peripheral, sparsely populated rural regions above all in northern Sweden (NUTEK 2007b). In these latter regions, particular emphasis is placed on the importance of individuals and individual firms and entrepreneurship in realizing growth (NUTEK 2002). Interestingly, when the gender-equality for growth discourse appears in relation to regions, it becomes conflated with a discourse of women as problematic for achieving regional growth. Women as a group are portrayed as failing to fulfil not only their productive role but also their reproductive role i.e. they are not realizing their potential or contributing their ‘fair-share’ to the achievement of growth and are thus constituted as a problem. This is evident even in the documents from the early 1990s, which while arguing very strongly for the inclusion of women in regional policy (particularly in terms of justice); nevertheless portray women as ‘lacking’ when it comes to achieving economic growth. This can be understood in terms of Bacchi’s *subjectification effects* as stigmatizing women, especially those in small rural regions – women themselves become responsible for the problem. It is interesting that when the category ‘women’ is defined in some way such as by age, ethnicity, health, education or even type of employment, it is always in terms of a problem.

Firstly, especially young women in the fertile age groups are named as having contributed to the depopulation problems faced by the small rural regions (Prop. 1993/94: 140, page 31; Prop. 1997/98: 62 page 50); Näringsdepartementet 2009 page 37) by leaving these regions in larger numbers than young men. Further, they are less likely to commute than men or to commute shorter distances which are considered negative for labour market flexibility (NUTEK 2002; Prop. 1993/94: 140). However, no connection is made between women’s lower wages or that they work part time to a much greater extent than men as reasons for their more limited commuting. This is explained solely in terms of their greater responsibility for the home and the family (NUTEK 2002) i.e. essentializing women as ‘mother’ and ‘care giver’. Thus women through their bodies (and the absence of these bodies in certain regions) are constructed as problematic for regional growth.

Secondly, women as a group work in the ‘wrong’ sector. The whitepaper *Settlements and Regions in Development* points out that the sex-segregated labour market is even more prominent in these problem regions (sparsely populated, rural regions) than in other regions. In these areas, ‘women’s’ employment is largely in the public sector and men’s is in traditionally male dominated sectors such as forestry and mining

(Prop. 1993/94: 140, page 31). This dominance of public sector employment is even to 'blame' for women's higher levels of education, particularly in the problem regions:

"Large differences in the percentage of highly educated men and women can be explained to a large extent by that women work in the public sector where the requirement for higher education has traditionally been greater than in the private sector which is often dominated by men" (NUTEK 2007c, page 21)

Thirdly, the problem of decreasing employment in the public sector is predicted to hit women's employment hardest particularly in these problem regions where both women's and men's economic activity is already below the national average. Here it is the turn of older women (aged 45-64) to be portrayed as especially problematic as their levels of economic activity are 9% under the national average. Younger women (aged 20-29) appear to be less of a problem as their activity rate is only 2% below the national average (possibly because many women in this age group have already left?) (Prop 1993/94: 140 page 25). More recently, the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth's (NUTEK) annual report for 2009, in its section headed *More strong regions*, only mentions women in terms of problems. It, for example, points out that the difference in employment growth between men and women has increased in all types of region and

"the employment activity rate is lower for women than men and the difference between women and men has increased during the period 1996 – 2007" (NUTEK 2009 page 84) .

Once again Bacchi's *subjectification effects* can be discerned - women are stigmatized as deficient, as a problem, whereas the silence surrounding men serves to exonerate them from blame.

Fourthly, although Sweden generally is portrayed as lacking an enterprise culture, the small rural regions and women are identified as having particularly low levels of entrepreneurship. The gap between women and men with regard to running their own businesses is pointed out as larger in Sweden than in other European countries (NUTEK 2009). Although the situation has improved since the beginning of the 1990s when women ran only 15% of businesses, women still lag far behind men when it comes to starting new businesses (Prop 1993/94: 140; NUTEK 2009). They are underrepresented in applying for business support; however, they are not seen as completely to blame for this as it is considered that the present form of assistance for start-ups, disadvantages women as it is geared to providing e.g. seed capital for machinery and women tend to apply for small sums of money for 'soft' enterprises (Prop 1993/94: 140 page 66). However, implicit in this is that women are not adventurous enough. At the same time, women's enterprise is seen as an untapped potential (Prop 1993/94: 140 page 134) that is needed, particularly in the rural regions where it is considered that they can make an important contribution to creativity within business (Prop 1993/94: 140 page 81). This view of women as lacking enterprise is found even in more recent reports. The government policy document *A national strategy for regional competitiveness, entrepreneurship and employment 2007-2013* points out, for example, that there are still:

"differences between the enterprise habits of men and women, and fewer women than men run businesses in Sweden. Women have a great potential for running businesses. If more women started and ran businesses, Sweden's economic development would be boosted. It is therefore important that initiatives to

promote enterprise among women be reinforced.” (Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications 2007 page 15)

Added to this is the problem that women as a group apparently lack the ‘right attitude’ to starting a business. Fewer women and young people born abroad can see themselves as starting their own business compared with men and young people born in Sweden (NUTEK 2009). A survey carried out in 2008 showed that only 67% of young women aged 18-30 could consider starting their own business compared with 80% of young men in the same age group. (NUTEK 2009 page 20). Here the conflation of the discourses of gender-equality for growth and of women as problematic in achieving regional development is evident. Women as a group are constructed as problematic, as in need of special measures, but at the same time possessing potential for contributing to the creation of growth. Somewhat contradictorily, this both extends and limits the subject positions available (cf Bacch’s *subjectification effects*).

Fifthly, women have a far greater level of absence from work due to ill health, for example in 2005, 62% of those on sick leave were women (Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications 2007). Interestingly, this is one of the few ‘problems’ with women that is couched in terms of the gendered power relations in society.

“Particularly high sickness figures are recorded in municipal areas of work, i.e. healthcare, schools and nursing. The combined picture shows that many of the reasons put forward as possible explanations of women’s absence due to sickness *can be attributed to shortcomings regarding equality between men and women – at both social and individual levels.*” (Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications 2007, page 62, my emphasis)

However, no suggestions are made for how this unequal power relationship can be changed.

Sixthly, when ethnicity is added to gender then it becomes even more apparent that women are failing to contribute to growth to the same extent as men.

“In 2005 employment intensity amongst men born abroad was 64.8%, compared with 77.8% for men born in Sweden. For women the equivalent figures were 58.7% for those born abroad and 74.2% for those born in Sweden” (Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications 2007, page 61)

In NUTEK’s annual report for 2009 in the section on strong regions, women and “persons with a foreign background”<sup>7</sup> are found wanting when it comes to entrepreneurship. Although, as a result of special measures, the proportion of women and persons with immigrant background starting a business has increased “men still account for the majority of new enterprises” (NUTEK 2009, page 44).

It is acknowledged that women and “persons with a foreign background” often have greater difficulty financing their businesses, but again it is implied that this is their own fault because they are overrepresented in within the service sector which is characterized by “small scale activities” and particularly women more often work in professions where the opportunities and conditions for entrepreneurship have been limited, such as healthcare, nursing and education. These are seen as more difficult to assess than more traditional businesses in the manufacturing sector. However,

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<sup>7</sup> This is the term used in the report

because of the greater economic significance of the service sector, it has become increasingly important that women and “persons with a foreign background” start businesses in this sector. This requires that measures are taken “to improve the competence of financial advisors to assess viability of businesses in the service sector” (NUTEK 2009, page 21). This has necessitated that ‘special efforts’ have been made to provide different types of information, advice and financing e.g. micro loans

“to create positive attitudes and encourage enterprise amongst *young people, women and persons with a foreign background*” (NUTEK 2009, page 34, my emphasis).

However, it is also pointed out that even if the number of women and persons with foreign origin starting new businesses has increased, their survival rate is lower than for ethnic Swedish men (NUTEK 2009, page 50). So once again these groups are accorded a subordinate subject position. Further, it is also apparent that persons with an immigrant background are treated as a resource in much the same way as women. For example the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth argues that

“the population born abroad” should be utilized as a labour power resource in order to meet the projected needs of business and industry (NUTEK 2004a page 22).

Thus we see that women and persons with an immigrant background are constructed, somewhat contradictorily, both as problematic in achieving regional economic growth and as a resource that has potential to be used in achieving economic growth. This draws attention to “the complexity and uncertainty of performed spaces and subjectivities” (Larner & Le Heron 2005, page 858). Can this fracture between problem and resource open up possibilities for the ‘other’, for out-groups, to challenge the dominant discourse of the strong region?

## Conclusions

In line with Bacchi’s argument concerning *subjectification effects*, women, persons with an immigrant background and even small rural regions and young people are mainly constituted as lacking, in need of special measures and deviant - as ‘the Other’ - in the discourse of regional development policies. This makes it difficult for these groups to get their voices heard and to challenge the dominant discourse. They are accorded a subordinate subject position, whilst the ‘silence’ concerning white, middle aged men implicitly accords them a subject position as the ‘active citizen’ with a self-evident position as an actor in the field of regional development and exoneration from blame for any lack of growth in the region. As Hudson & Rönnblom (2007) have pointed out in relation to women, the ‘lived effects’ that these constructions carry with them could be quite severe for groups attempting to challenge the dominant discourse.

The problem of creating strong regions has been represented largely in terms of achieving economic growth. This has limited and closed off alternative ways of thinking about regional development in other than economic terms. The social dimension of growth has been subordinated the economic and gender-equality has thus largely remained an issue that can be ‘tagged on’ to regional policy in a way that does not fundamentally change or challenge the gendered power relations. However, as has been pointed out in the paper, there are several discourses at work – competing, complementing and contradicting each other. The strong region discourse, the gender-equality for growth discourse, and the women as a problem in

achieving regional development discourse are, somewhat paradoxically, complementary and contradictory - both opening and closing spaces and opportunities for subjectivities for women and other 'Others'. In the gender-equality for regional growth discourse, women and other 'Others' are portrayed as a resource, a potential, that needs to be included if growth is to be achieved. This construction of these groups as a resource is not unproblematic, nevertheless it seems to offer some potential for the construction of women as a group (or at least those constructed as entrepreneurial) to be accorded more active subject positions. However, this discourse also intersects with the women and other 'others' as a problem discourse, constraining and limiting the subject positions available. Thus, although on the face of it, it still appears to be very much business as usual, there may lurk potential in the cracks between the representations of women, immigrants and young people both as problems and as assets. These may provide opportunities in which the dominant gender, racialized and sexualized power relations in regional policy could be challenged and active subject positions constituted for non-traditional regional actors ('Others') enabling to them influence and shape regional policies rather be the passive recipients of these policies. In the words of the song *Lies*<sup>8</sup> by Glen Hansard "The little cracks they escalated"... "So plant the thought and watch it grow."

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<sup>8</sup> From the soundtrack of the film *Once*



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