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Making themselves heard: women's and men's voice through the regional petitioning process in Sweden, 1758-1880

Abstract

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thousands of women and men contacted the Governor's Administration of Västmanland (Länsstyrelsen i Västmanlands län), handing in petitions concerning a wide range of matters. This thesis studies these cases to deepen our understanding of women's and men's ability and need to make themselves heard through the regional petitioning process. It also elucidates how this practice was intertwined with people's endeavours to make a living by focusing on the participation's connection to resources. By studying petition registers and a corpus of nearly 3,000 surviving petition files, it contributes to existing scholarship in three important ways.

First, the thesis introduces an extended theoretical conceptualisation of the regional petitioning process, where the relationship between petitioner and respondent is integral to the petitioning itself. This inclusion shows that the commonest reason why people needed to make themselves heard, thus establishing a relationship with the governor and his administration in the first place, was because of interactions and conflicts with other people over some resource, primarily credit, land or working roles. Everyday interactions led people to use the regional administration in legally regulated disputes, which ultimately had political implications.

Second, by comparing the participation of women and men as well as that of labouring people to other groups, the thesis sheds light on how the ability and need to make yourself heard varied with gender, marital status and socioeconomic status. To participate in this manner was expensive, which undoubtedly affected poor people's ability to do so. Nevertheless, we find people from the lowest rungs of society who vehemently protected their rights, sometimes as petitioners but more often as respondents. Women's participation at the administration, as in almost all official contexts at this time, was lower than men's, sometimes only a fraction. Despite their low levels of participation, it nevertheless took many forms, a variety that continued into the nineteenth century.

Third, the investigation studies how the ways people made themselves heard through the regional petitioning process evolved over time, making it one of few Swedish studies of petitioners and respondents beyond the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its temporal setting has yielded previously unknown insights into how the development of *voice* through the petitioning process was connected to administrative bureaucratisation, aspects of the judicial revolution, the gradual but non-linear disappearance of household culture and the emergence of a civil citizen.