

# “A small step forward can be as important as a big one” – Parliamentary debate about the first abortion law in Sweden in 1938

Magnus Gustafson, Malmö University, Sweden

## Abstract

“A small step forward can be as important as a big one”. So says the social democrat Agda Östlund in the Second Chamber of the Swedish Parliament on Wednesday May 18, 1938, when she justifies her support for a new abortion law.<sup>1</sup> The law gives the right to abortion for women with faltering health and many children, but not for those who suffer financial hardship or social disgrace after becoming pregnant out of wedlock. The debate, and the bill, is characterized by a spirit of cooperation and willingness to compromise. An exception is the conflict between the female members. Voting takes place by standing up and only a few votes against the bill. Previous research has not considered class as central to this debate. However, as we shall see, the debate is about the working-class woman.

## Keywords

Agda Östlund, abortion law in Sweden, Swedish politics 1930s, working-class women, rhetorical situation

This article takes a rhetorical perspective on the abortion debate in the Second Chamber in May 1938. Specifically, I contextualize the parliamentary debate and conduct a textual analysis how the statements in the debate, relate to a rhetorical situation. I analyze the utterances in accordance with the theoretical perspective established by rhetoric scholar Lloyd F. Bitzer, the key concepts are rhetorical situation, problem, restrictions and audience (Bitzer, 1968). The aim is to clarify which rhetorical strategies will be used in the debate, with particular focus on Agda Östlund.

The Social Democratic Women’s Association had been pushing in the fight to change the abortion legislation for years. A couple of years prior to the debate, 1,500 organizations with a total of a quarter of a million members united around a call demanding the right to abortion for those who suffer from financial need and social disgrace. The Social Democratic Minister of Justice at the time, Karl Schlyter, who was of the same opinion, took the initiative for an investigation (Lennerhed, 2002, pp. 93).

The current law primarily affected women from the working class. Despite the ban, well-to-do women could obtain relatively safe abortions with the help of money and contacts. They could also choose to travel away to hide the pregnancy, give birth and give it away. Working-class women, on the other hand, were forced to turn to the uneducated or try on their own. Thousands of women became sterile and around fifty died due to infections and other complications from improperly performed abortion procedures. Even abortion procedures under medical

---

<sup>1</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 27.

supervision had certain risks, as sulfa and penicillin had not yet come into general use (Hatje, 1974, p. 119).

During this mobilization for a change in the law opinion was turning. The discourse, or problem formulation around the abortion issue, was changing. Namely, the problem surrounding the population issue was getting a bigger place in the formulation of the problem. It had to do with reformism. The Social Democrats could move forward by using this discourse and creating cooperation and agreements with the conservatives.

At the beginning of the 20th century, abortion was illegal throughout Europe. In 1920, Russia, which two years would change its name to the Soviet Union, became the first country to legalize abortion. Legalization was intended to be temporary, designed to recognize women's equal status and protect their health. It was believed that as social conditions improved and the state assumed the burden of child rearing, abortions would become less necessary, and the problem of unwanted pregnancies would cease to exist. For population policy reasons, restrictions were reintroduced for women seeking abortions in 1936.

In 1926, during the Weimar Republic, laws were introduced that eased the penalties for abortion. After Hitler came to power, the existing legislation was applied more strictly, except for abortion on eugenic grounds. In 1936, the number of prosecutions doubled from previous years and harsher sentences were imposed. After the start of World War II in 1939, abortion was banned in Germany and death penalty was introduced in 1943.

Even in France, the abortion law became more restrictive just before the Second World War. Doctors involved in abortions were automatically suspended from medical practice for at least five years. Within months of the Pétain government signing an armistice with Hitler, the Pétain government made abortion laws even stricter.

Abortion on medical and humanitarian grounds became legal in Poland in 1932. The following year, in 1933, Latvia introduced abortion rights on medical, humanitarian and social grounds. In the Nordic countries, Sweden and Iceland introduced the right to abortion on medical-social grounds and Denmark on medical grounds during the second half of the thirties (David, 1992, pp. 3). In Norway, however, the discussion never led to any law. Some believe that the women in the Social Democratic Party were let down by their male party colleagues. Others believe that the Minister of Justice Trygve Lie rejected the bill, which resembled in Sweden and Iceland, because he feared it would lead to a stricter practice. Despite the ban, the possibilities of obtaining an abortion legally were still greater in Norway than in the rest of the Nordic countries (Elvbakken, 2021, pp. 121). In Sweden, many continued to have illegal abortions even after the new law (Lennerhed, 2008, p. 39).

In the United States, where the influence of the Catholic Church was strong, abortion and contraception were considered one and the same issue. The same arguments used against abortion – for example, the value of human life – were used against contraception. Even in Sweden, the contraceptive issue and the abortion issue were linked together (Williams, 2016, pp. 13). In fact, the Parliament decides on the legalization of abortion and the right to inform about contraceptives on the same day.

In 1933 the Social Democrats and the Agrarian Party reached a settlement on unemployment and agricultural issues. The background of the settlement was the agricultural crisis and mass unemployment affecting Sweden at the time. Up to 200,000 people were out of work. The

Social Democrats got their demand for funding to fight unemployment through, while the Agrarian Party got a higher price for butter and expanded regulation of agriculture. Inspiration for the cross-block cooperation was drawn from the neighboring country of Denmark, where the social democratic Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning formed a government with the liberals. The crisis was not only economic and social but also political. In Germany, Adolf Hitler and the Nazis had come to power in the wake of the crisis.

A few years later, the Social Democrats and the Agrarian Party formalized their cooperation in a proper coalition. The Social Democrats' interest in the Agrarian Party also had long-term and strategic reasons. Namely, the party wanted to broaden its voter base and the hard-working small farmers were considered to offer such an opportunity. At the time, farmers and industrial workers were occupational groups of equal size, and the combination "farmers and workers" had become a political term (Ohlsson, 2014, pp. 255). The Agrarian Party, for its part, preferred cooperation with the rising Social Democrats over a bourgeois collaboration, which included the Liberal Party, a party they perceived as unreliable in trade and agricultural matters, according to political scientist Leif Lewin (2017, p. 201).

When Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, two researchers who have been called the architects of the People's Home [Folkhemmet], published the book *Crisis in the Population Question* [Kris i befolkningsfrågan] in November 1934, a population policy debate broke out in Sweden. The book had a huge impact (Hirdman et al., 2012, p. 213). As the right has long stressed, Sweden had a depopulation crisis, and the Myrdals took over the argument and reformulated the population issue to be about left-wing politics. Birth rates fell because children cost money, they argued. Humans are rational and choose not to have children because of economic insecurity, lack of housing, poor conditions for women in the labor market and other social circumstances. The Myrdals' solution involved a solidarity-oriented social policy with child benefits, housing subsidies for families with children, free health care for all children, free school meals and free kindergartens and afternoon care. Their solution aimed to enable to combine motherhood with gainful employment, at least until the children reached the school age.

Minister of Social Affairs Gustav Möller took advantage of the inflamed population debate to get the right-wing parties on board with carrying out social policy reforms. For Möller, who did not seem to be convinced of the threat of depopulation per se, population policy arguments become primarily a tactic to get the right-wing parties on board with the reforms that were important to him:

Jag får säga att jag inte ett ögonblick tvekar att skrämma hur många bondeförbundare och folkpartister som helst med hotet om att vårt folk eljest kommer att dö ut, ifall jag med det hotet kan förmå dem att rösta för sociala förslag som jag här framlägger. Det är min enkla syn på befolkningsfrågan, och den räcker för mig (Hirdman et al., 2012, p. 219).

I must say that I do not hesitate for a moment to frighten any number of members of the Agrarian Party and Liberals with the threat that our people will otherwise die out, if by that threat I can induce them to vote for the social proposals that I put forward. That's my simple view of the population issue, and it's enough for me.

As early as May 1935, Möller appointed a population commission, a large parliamentary

inquiry commission that consisted of a group of experts and politicians from different parties who were given the task of proposing measures to increase marriage formation and childbearing (Hatje, 1974, p. 27).

Historian Yvonne Hirdman tests the idea that Gunnar and Alva Myrdal exploited women and their difficult situation for their ideas about the transformation of society. An example is their argumentation on the abortion issue (Hirdman, 1992, p. 127). Abortion for purely economic reasons is socially and individually an emergency measure, not a satisfactory social policy solution. The very fact that women are forced to have an abortion for economic reasons constitutes “an indictment of our society” and proof of the need for redistributive politics, they reasoned. This argumentation could thus be seen as a tactical use of the female situation to push for social reforms. Nevertheless, the Myrdals’ conclusion on the abortion issue was that abortion must be allowed for economic reasons because the interventions would then be performed by experts (Myrdal, 1935, p. 62).

The Myrdals’ tactics failed, reasoned Hirdman. While they proposed reforms that would free women and make it easier for them to combine motherhood with paid work, the population commission’s proposal aimed at giving women the opportunity to realize their nature by becoming mothers under the best conditions: “The population policy became very much a support for the homes with the wife well preserved inside”. According to Hirdman, the Myrdals failed with their tactics because they underestimated their opponent.

Among others, the right-wing Magnusson of Skövde was on the population commission. The population commission had two main objectives: to increase the birth rate and to abolish poverty and need through social policy. A conflict arose between these two objectives when the commission had to take a position on the abortion issue (Hatje, 1974, p. 133). Even the commission seems to be using women’s situation to push for social reforms: it used the Myrdal’s argument tactic albeit with a different choice of words. For the commission, the need for abortion for economic and social reasons does not constitute “an indictment of our society” but is instead a “declaration of incompetence” by society.<sup>2</sup>

The population commission proposed a series of reforms to make it easier for women to give birth. These include, for example, increased maternity allowance, improved maternity care and help with housing loans.<sup>3</sup> Regarding social disgrace, meaning unmarried women who fell pregnant, which drove many women to have an abortion, the commission proposed to educate and put pressure on employers to not fire unwed mothers.<sup>4</sup> However, the commission drew a different conclusion than the Myrdals: Since the proposed measures had to be implementable immediately, an abortion law that allows abortion for economic and social reasons was unnecessary. According to the commission, the only group that should have the right to abortion for social reasons was the mothers with faltering health and many children. This group

---

<sup>2</sup> Statens offentliga utredningar 1937:6, Yttrande i abortfrågan. Avgivet av Befolkningskommissionen, Stockholm 1937, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Statens offentliga utredningar 1937:6, Yttrande i abortfrågan. Avgivet av Befolkningskommissionen, Stockholm 1937, pp. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Statens offentliga utredningar 1937:6, Yttrande i abortfrågan. Avgivet av Befolkningskommissionen, Stockholm 1937, pp. 26. ”In particular, with regard to women’s risk of being fired in certain occupations, if they marry or become pregnant, the commission assumes that through strong pressure from enlightened public opinion or, if this is not sufficient, through legislation, the employer in question here is forced to act in a socially more insightful and responsible way”, it says on p. 28.

was part of what the commission called the medical-social category. For both financial and medical reasons, these women were considered incapable of carrying another pregnancy.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the Myrdals' tactic to use the women's vulnerable position to push through a social transformation failed in the reforms subsequently proposed by the population commission were not aimed at liberating the women and giving them the opportunity to combine family life and gainful work; rather, they were aimed at making women realizing their nature as mothers under the best conditions.

In the spring of 1938, the red-green coalition presented a bill on a new abortion law. Responsible for the bill was K.G. Westman, the minister of justice and a member of the Agricultural Party. The bill followed the population commission's proposal and did not grant the right to abortion for social and economic reasons, only for humanitarian, medical and eugenic reasons. In line with the commission's proposal, the medical category in the bill gives room for "mixed medical-social indication".<sup>6</sup>

The law committee, which carried out a revision of the bill, considered that the demarcation for medical-social indication was well balanced. At the same time, it emphasized the importance of continuing the reform work so that women in the future do not have to have an abortion due to financial need and social disgrace.<sup>7</sup> However, a group of right-wing parties contended in a motion that the definition of medical-social indication is unclear and too "elastic" and advocated that it be narrowed down to only apply to medical reasons.<sup>8</sup> The Communists, for their part, highlighted in their motion the social and economic vulnerability of women and advocated the right to abortion for social and economic reasons.<sup>9</sup>

A rhetorical situation is a language situation in which a speaker can influence the beliefs and actions of participants. According to rhetorical researcher Lloyd F. Bitzer (1968), for a situation to be considered rhetorical, it must contain a problem or some other factor that motivates an utterance and an audience that can influence the problem. In addition, the rhetorical situation

---

<sup>5</sup> Statens offentliga utredningar 1937:6, Yttrande i abortfrågan. Avgivet av Befolkningsskmissionen, Stockholm 1937, p. 20. "The Population Commission has already emphasized its view that the committee's proposal on the permissibility of abortion on certain social indications cannot be rejected except under the condition that at the same time reforms are carried out, strong enough to abolish the underlying social ills. In the long run, of course, one cannot allow the abortions to be carried out quite innocently to an enormous extent and at the same time, according to the letter of the law, keep them indiscriminately criminalized. To maintain a criminal law prohibition, which only prevents the experts in abortion operations, namely the doctors, from performing them, to allow a section to remain in the criminal law, which was only used to exceptionally set an example, it is a condition, which is not a right - and cultural state worthy. The essential question therefore becomes, in the opinion of the commission, whether the positive reforms concerned by the committee cannot be implemented to the extent and with the speed that pregnancy for women no longer had to entail a risk of distress or misfortune. If this were possible, a new basis in legal consciousness would of course have been created for the enforcement of the law. Before considering this crucial issue, the Commission would like to state as its opinion that a legally accepted permissibility of abortion on social indications would mean a declaration of incompetence on the part of society explicitly written into our legislation itself has factual validity, although fairness requires that it also be stated ; the current state of affairs is, as the commission has developed, unsustainable, as it means danger both to the spiritual and physical health of the people as well as to the sanctity of the legal order. But the Commission believes that, before this condition has been thoroughly tested, this conclusion should not be drawn".

<sup>6</sup> Kungl. Maj:ts proposition nr 136. Förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Lagutskottet 1938 nr 42, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Motioner i andra kammaren 1938, nr 378, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Motioner i andra kammaren 1938, nr 381, p. 3. "It is cruelty to lower-class women to deny them the right to terminate a pregnancy due to social reasons," the motion states.

includes all the restrictions that the speakers must consider if they are to be able to convince the audience to take on the problem in the way they wish.

Thus, rhetorical acts are always anchored in a historical context and constitute a response to a specific situation in this context: “Rhetorical works belong to the class of things which obtain their character from the circumstances of the historical context in which they occur. [...] Similarly, a work is rhetorical because it is a response to a situation of a certain kind.” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 3).

The problem is an imperfection that has an urgent character: it is a defect, an obstacle, something that is in a way that it should not be. A problem that cannot be influenced with rhetoric is not a rhetorical problem, according to Bitzer (p. 6). On the other hand, critics have pointed out that the very identification and description of the problem is part of the rhetorical act. They believe, with good reason, that Bitzer, in his definition of the problem and the rhetorical situation, does not pay enough attention to the fact that the actor sets the agenda by selecting facts and events, interpreting them, and giving them a specific meaning by portraying them linguistically and symbolically. In other words, rhetoric is about linguistically and symbolically creating attention for a specific situation and giving it a specific meaning. According to rhetoric researcher Richard E. Vatz, “It is only when the meaning is seen as the result of a creative act and not a discovery, that rhetoric will be perceived as the supreme discipline it deserves to be” (1973, p. 161).

Political scientist Kari Palonen argues that the difference of opinion, the pro et contra, or for and against debate, defines parliament as an institution (2019, p. 1). In the case of the abortion law debate in 1938 the battle concerns the law committee’s proposal about the medical-social indication which the Communists wanted to expand to a social indication and which a group of right-wing parties instead wanted to replace with a strictly medical indication.

The framework for the discussion of abortion rights changed when it became part of the population issue. This affected not only the abortion issue but also the Social Democrats’ reform project. There was a consensus in the Swedish Parliament that the population issue was important. This was an issue all parties had to deal with. Consequently, the abortion debate culminated in a compromise within the framework of the population issue. Several speakers emphasized the importance of cooperation and compromise to find a solution.

Right-winger Magnusson of Skövde describes how, during his work in the population commission, he reconsidered his stance and stood behind abortion rights for women with faltered health and many children.<sup>10</sup> Liberal Party member Nilson of Eskilstuna speaks of a “good middle way” and party colleague Thorwald Bergquist of a “happy middle way” and a “cautious” and “well-balanced” bill. K.G. Westman, the minister of justice and a member of the Agricultural Party K.G. Westman calls the bill a “conscientiously considered attempt” to find a solution to difficult legislative problems and points out that the law should be seen as a step on the way to make it easier for women’s motherhood.<sup>11</sup>

An exception is the communist Hagberg of Luleå, who believes that the abortion issue was “sacrificed on the altar of cooperation” and that the Social Democratic members who are part of the coalition government must have committed violence against their own conscience.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 25; p. 19; p. 20; p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 35.

Another exception is the right-wing Olsson of Staxäng, who maintains that it is not possible to compromise on an issue concerning “Christianity’s faith in God and reverence for the majesty of the Creator.”<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, there seems to be a consensus regarding eugenics. Although the bill broadens the definition of abortion for eugenic reasons, it is not subject to debate. One of the few who raises the subject is the liberal Mosesson of Lidingö who, after standing behind the law committee’s proposal, emphasizes his wish for abortion would to take place if the parents have a genetic predisposition to mental illness, mental retardation or physical illness.<sup>14</sup> Historian Annika Berg points out that eugenics was adopted by representatives of different political parties at the time and adapted to different ideologies (2009, p. 165). According to the historian of ideas Gunnar Broberg and the historian Mattias Tydén, during the 1930s, a special “welfare state eugenics” developed in Sweden where systematic sterilizations can be seen to limit the costs of various types of social care. The followers of this eugenics distanced themselves from Nazism and preferred to speak of hereditary hygiene rather than racially charged racial hygiene (1996, pp. 95).

There also seems to be a consensus that the fetus should be considered a human life. The Social Democrat Vilhelm Lundstedt, who chose to support the Communists’ motion, is the only one who has a dissenting opinion. He advocates free abortion until the fetus is 20 weeks old: the fetus should be considered a woman’s body part. If a woman eats so that she gets gastritis, if she drinks alcohol and destroys her organs, or if she mutilates or kills herself, she is not punished by criminal law. On the other hand, if she has an abortion to save herself and a future human being from an unhappy life, she is punished, this does not add up, argues Lundstedt.<sup>15</sup>

Men, and their role when it comes to unwanted pregnancies, were conspicuously absent in the debate. When they do it is as officials. Several members of Parliament emphasize the importance of doctors when it comes to making the abortion law work. For instance, the liberal Sandberg of Luleå remark that if the law is applied by responsible doctors, it would provide a reasonably satisfactory guarantee against abuse and against moral degradation.<sup>16</sup>

This debate on abortion law has previously been discussed by historian Elisabeth Elgan. However, her discussion lacks a class perspective, which is necessary when looking at this debate (Elgan, 1994, pp. 176). In fact, class is a central issue. It is the working-class woman that the legislation strikes against. Within the capitalist system, the working-class sells its labor and working-class women are correspondingly reduced to reproduction and bodily labor. Class affiliation is determined by the individual’s relationship to the means of production. The working-class woman has a special position, either she is a housewife or works in a factory with a lower wage than the men and is then even more exploited. During the 1930s, working-class women were forced to either try to have an abortion on their own or get help from quacks and thereby risk their life and health, states Vilhelm Lundstedt.<sup>17</sup> No one talks about the middle-class women as the problem the debate is about. What the members disagree about, what the problem is about, concerned how the working-class woman should function in modern society: Which limitations of the working-class woman’s right to decide should be maintained within

---

<sup>13</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 1; p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 10.

the framework of an acute population crisis? What new freedoms are possible to give the working-class woman within the framework of an acute population crisis?

The image of the good womanhood as synonymous with reproduction is prominent in the debate. For example, K.G. Westman claim that a good mother makes sacrifices and takes responsibility for the survival of society. It is necessary to support the maternal instinct for the survival of society. However, giving birth is always associated with sacrifice and personal risk. There are times, Westman admits, when society's interests in more citizens conflicts with the woman's individual interest. Nonetheless, he adds, providing more rights than suggested in the commission's report means theoretically advocating genocide.<sup>18</sup> Magnusson of Skövde is in agreement that a good woman takes social responsibility in the population issue: When society tries to improve the conditions of mothers and families in every possible way, society also has the right to demand that they take on the social responsibility of giving birth to children. Otherwise, the social assistance is useless.<sup>19</sup>

As a guarantee that an extended abortion right is not abused, Vilhelm Lundstedt highlights the women's maternal instinct. According to Lundstedt, a good woman longs for children and aborts only in case of emergency: thus, the mother's instinct ensures that the decision to terminate the pregnancy was preceded by the deepest despair, he believes.<sup>20</sup>

Against the image of the good woman and the good mother stands the image of the bad woman and the bad mother. The bad mother gives birth to children out of wedlock. However, Magnusson of Skövde argues that at the same time as we must strive to eliminate the social dishonor in connection with motherhood, we must realize that not every motherhood is entirely free from social dishonor in connection with motherhood. But above all, it is motherhood within the family that must primarily be promoted.<sup>21</sup> The bad woman shows no interest in the home and family and has deficient knowledge in terms of care and nursing. Even the lower classes place ever higher demands on comfort in their new modern homes and consider themselves to have no place for children. Therefore, it is dangerous to talk about social reasons when it comes to abortion, maintains Nilson of Eskilstuna.

Jag hörde för inte länge sedan en kvinna någonstades i vårt land säga på tal om hennes för några år sedan gifta dotter: 'Hur skulle det se ut med barn i det hemmet, sådana möbler som de har!' När man har den inställningen, då är det fara å färde.<sup>22</sup>

Not long ago I heard a woman somewhere in our country say about her daughter who was married a few years ago: 'How would it look with children in that home, such furniture as they have!' When you have that attitude, then something dangerous is about to happen.

The bad woman commits violence against her own nature and maternal instinct by having an abortion out of convenience. She imagines the responsibility for the expected child is so great that she wants to free herself from it, declared Magnusson of Skövde: "One convinces oneself

---

<sup>18</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, pp. 25.

that they can face poverty and misery of all kinds, that it is therefore better for their own sake and for the sake of the expected child to avoid the burden of childbearing.’<sup>23</sup>

The bad woman also exploits and manipulates the system, deceives the doctors and performs an abortion for reasons of convenience, claimed Olsson of Staxäng. He refers to statistics which he believes show that a large percentage of women used their tuberculosis diagnosis as a pretext to terminate the pregnancy. Furthermore, he refers to a doctor who states that medical reasons can be abused. Accordingly, he argues, “This shows how necessary it is that even purely medical indications are surrounded by clear and sharply demarcated regulations”.<sup>24</sup>

In the debate between the female members, which could be described as the debate within the debate, the overall problem remains, but is developed with the question of whether reformism as a political strategy can be seen as valid in a situation where women are suffering and the question of how they can represent the interests of working-class women. The female speakers in the debate were Agda Östlund, Ruth Gustafson and Solveig-Rönn-Christiansson. Agda Östlund and Ruth Gustafson have worked side by side in the Social Democratic women’s movement since they first met in the Social Democratic women’s club in Stockholm at the beginning of the century. While Östlund became one of the first five female parliamentarians, Gustafson became a member of Stockholm’s city council. Only in 1932 was Gustafson elected to the Parliament. Solveig Rönn-Christiansson belongs to another party, the Communists, and a younger generation. Rönn-Christiansson has been a member of Parliament for two years, since 1936.

Here a somewhat different picture of the men emerges. The men involved in pregnancies are described by Rönn-Christiansson and Gustafson as irresponsible. In many cases, women are forced to have an abortion because the men shirk their responsibility, argues Gustafson.<sup>25</sup> Because these men waste money that should have been spent on providing for mothers-to-be, the maternity aid committee is forced to pay out contributions in kind, explains Rönn-Christiansson.<sup>26</sup> Rönn-Christiansson describes the men in the Labor government who presented the bill on the abortion issue as hard-hearted.<sup>27</sup>

For Rönn-Christiansson, the good woman is synonymous with motherhood and reproduction. However, she describes motherhood with concrete and starkly realistic images. She talks about mothers who take care of large groups of children in poor conditions. According to Rönn-Christiansson, half a million are provided for through the poor relief system, just as many live in substandard housing. A third of the children are malnourished, and 4,000 die annually of malnutrition before the age of one.<sup>28</sup> Parallel to this concrete and starkly realistic image of motherhood, Rönn-Christiansson also conveys the image of motherhood as a utopia and as an image of a societal ideal, following the Soviet communist model.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 24. During the difficult years, abortion was free in the Soviet Union. It meant a relief and a way out for the women. In addition to this, the country had a broad information campaign on sexual issues. Now the law has changed, there is no longer free abortion. The reason is that conditions in the Soviet Union have changed. Now the women of the Soviet Union can become mothers with joy. Here in Sweden, we have not yet achieved these conditions. Therefore, an expanded right to abortion is needed, Rönn-Christiansson believes.

Agda Östlund is the only speaker who gives an image of the woman that goes beyond reproduction. An image of the woman as an independent individual who has the right to decide emerges when Östlund reserves herself against a section in the bill that states that underage women who have often been self-sufficient for many years should not be allowed to express themselves in decisions about abortion.<sup>30</sup>

Rönn-Christiansson regards cross-class collaboration as part of the problem. Hopes for a solution to an acute social problem have been dashed and perhaps the disappointment feels stronger because the bill comes from a Labor government, she says.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, Gustafson believes the spirit of cooperation and willingness to compromise is a prerequisite for moving forward. Although she is not completely satisfied, she sees it as a success that women with faltering health and many children are given the right to abortion under the bill.<sup>32</sup> Even Östlund is on the same page that the bill is a step in the right direction. If it proves necessary, the right to abortion can be further expanded in the future, she states.<sup>33</sup>

When Östlund discuss the abortion issue, she also talks about her entire political career. On several occasions she had tried to get the abortion issue at the agenda. In 1921, after a high-profile abortion case, the Social Democratic Women's Association wrote a letter to the Minister of Justice demanding a change in the law (Flood, 1939, p. 147). In 1928, a delegation from Sweden attended the Socialist Women's International in Brussels and made a statement in favor of abortion rights (Vessman, 1928, pp. 6). The year after, in 1929, as a member of Parliament, Östlund had submitted a motion for a comprehensive change to the abortion law. The proposal was rejected in all instances (Elgan 1994, chapter six).

At the same time as she stands up for how she believes politics should be conducted, and what she has learned as a member of the Parliament for almost two decades, she also expresses disappointment that progress has not gone at the pace she had hoped:

Det är inte i dag, som denna fråga för första gången är föremål för behandling. Under de år, jag deltagit i riksdagens arbete, har den varit före många gånger om, men vi ha aldrig slutgiltigt kunnat lösa densamma. Jag har således för min del kunnat bli besviken många gånger. [...]  
Även om det föreliggande förslaget icke går så långt som jag skulle önska, behöver det inte hindra, att man även kan bestämma sig för att ta det som är möjligt och vara nöjd därmed utan att därför i varje enskild punkt behöva deklarerera sin ståndpunkt. [...]  
Det föreliggande förslaget är av djupt allvarlig natur och ingriper i hela vårt liv och hela vår framtid. Jag tycker det vore väl värt att bifalla, och att ett mindre steg framåt kan vara av lika stor betydelse som ett stort.<sup>34</sup>

It is not today that this issue is being considered for the first time. In the years that I have participated in the work of the Parliament, it has come up many times, but we have never been able to finally resolve it. For my part, I have thus been able to be disappointed many times. [...]

---

<sup>30</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 26.

<sup>34</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, pp. 26.

Even if the present proposal does not go so far as I would like, it does not have to prevent that one can also decide to take what is possible and be satisfied with it without therefore having to declare one's position in every single point. [...]

The present proposal is of a deeply serious nature and interferes with our whole life and our whole future. I think it would be well worth approving, and that a small step forward can be just as important as a big one.

As a symbol of reformism, Östlund herself becomes the subject of debate. Rönn-Christiansson believes that Östlund as a member of the law committee has failed her mission: As a representative of working-class women, she should have had something more to say on the abortion issue.<sup>35</sup> Gustafson opposes Rönn-Christiansson making herself the working-class women's representative and defending party colleague Östlund. For many years, and long before Rönn-Christiansson became active, Östlund has fought for the interests of working-class women.<sup>36</sup> It is unnecessary for Gustafson to defend Östlund, Rönn-Christiansson answer:

(T)y fru Östlund är säkerligen en av de vackraste kvinnogestalterna i svensk arbetarrörelse. Men det är just detta, att det goda initiativet och det man tidigare planerat i denna sak fått en egendomlig utlösning i fru Östlunds uttalande, som jag tagit mig friheten att idag kritisera.<sup>37</sup>

Mrs. Östlund is certainly one of the most beautiful female figures in the Swedish labor movement. But it is precisely this, that the good initiative and what was previously planned in this matter had a peculiar outcome in Mrs. Östlund's statement, that I took the liberty of criticizing today.

## Conclusion

In the debate between the women, the social democrat Agda Östlund, who is at the end of her career, is thus in the center. She receives criticism but is also elevated to a monument and becomes a symbol of reformism. Through the abortion issue, she signs her political testament. The new law should be seen as a small step on the way, she says.

The purpose of this article has been to clarify which rhetorical strategies are used in the parliamentary debate on the 1938 abortion law in Sweden. The main point of view is the rational argument of population policy, which means that society cannot afford an overly extended abortion right. The Social Democrat Vilhelm Lundstedt's argument for free abortion up to week twenty because the fetus is then considered a part of the woman's body and the right-wing Olsson of Staxäng's argument about obedience to God are examples of ethical and ethical-religious arguments.

A rhetorical strategy among male members is to contrast the good woman who is synonymous with reproduction and who makes sacrifices and takes responsibility for the survival of society,

---

<sup>35</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, pp. 31.

<sup>37</sup> Andra kammaren 1938:35, Ang. förslag till lag om avbrytande av havandeskap, pp. 33.

against the bad woman who shows disinterest in the home and family and does violence to her own maternal instinct. Another rhetorical strategy among male members is to make invisible the men's own role when it comes to unwanted pregnancies. Another rhetorical strategy is to talk around the class issue in different ways, for example by describing women as too comfortable in modern life.

The conflict between the women could be described as a debate within the debate. While addressing the overall problem, it is further developed by questioning whether reformism as a political strategy is valid in a situation when women are suffering and how they can represent the interests of working-class women. Here the very problem around class becomes explicit. Men's role in unwanted pregnancies also emerges here. The men are described as irresponsible. Agda Östlund tries to build trust with the audience by highlighting her long experience as a politician. When she describes the necessity to compromise to move forward, she mixes factual, emotional and ethical arguments: "The present proposal is of a deeply serious nature and interferes with our whole life and our whole future", Östlund says.

When the communist Solveig Rönn-Christiansson describes the men in the Labor government as hard-hearted, there is both an ethical and an emotional dimension to the argument. Class cooperation is regarded by communists as unethical. In her description of how working-class women and their children live in poverty, she mixes factual and emotional argumentation. When she speaks of the real class position and makes herself the authentic working-class representative, she uses a strategy that is apt to inspire confidence. She accuses Agda Östlund of having failed the working-class women. The debate that follows will then be about Agda Östlund's trust capital. When Social Democrat Ruth Gustafson defends her party mate Östlund, Rönn-Christiansson replies that it is unnecessary because "Östlund is certainly one of the most beautiful female figures in the Swedish labor movement". But Rönn-Christiansson adds with a factual argument that it is precisely when it comes to the position regarding the abortion law that she has failed.

Just like for many male debaters, the good woman is synonymous with reproduction for the communist Rönn-Christiansson. The only one who gives an image of the woman that goes beyond reproduction is the social democrat Östlund. Here the image of the woman appears as an independent individual who has the right to self-determination.

### Author Bio

**Magnus Gustafson** is a doctoral student in history and history didactics at Malmö University in Sweden and has a focus on rhetorical strategies in the Swedish Social Democratic movement. In his PhD he writes about the female pioneer Agda Östlund (1870–1942) and her rhetorical strategies in the voting struggle and as a member in parliament. Gustafson is a member of The Nordic Network for Research on Working-Class Literature which organizes researchers interested in working-class literatures from the Nordic countries.

### Bibliography

- Berg, A., (2009), *Den gränslösa hälsan. Signe och Axel Höjer, folkhälsan och expertisen*, Uppsala.
- Bitzer, L., (1968), "The Rhetorical Situation", in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1:1968.
- Broberg, G., & Tydén, M., (1996), "Eugenics in Sweden: Efficient Care", in *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland*,

- red. Gunnar Broberg och Nils Roll-Hansen, East Lansing, Michigan State University Press.
- David, H., (1992), "Abortion in Europe, 1920–91: A public Health Perspective", in *Studies in Family Planning*, 1:1992.
- Elgan, E., (1994), *Genus och politik. En jämförelse mellan svensk och fransk abort- och preventivmedelspolitik från sekelskiftet till andra världskriget*, Uppsala.
- Elvbakken, K., (2021), *Abortspørsmålets politiske historie 1900–2020*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget.
- Flood, H., (1939), *Den socialdemokratiska kvinnorörelsen i Sverige*, Stockholm, Tidens förlag.
- Hatje, A., (1974), *Befolkningsfrågan och välfärden. Debatten om familjepolitik och nativitetsökning under 1930- och 1940-talen*, Stockholm, Allmänna förlaget.
- Hirdman, Y., (1992), *Den socialistiska hemmafrun och andra historier*, Stockholm, Carlssons.
- Hirdman, Y., Lundberg, U., & Björkman, J., (2012), *Sveriges historia 1920–1965*, Stockholm, Norstedts.
- Lennerhed, L., (2002), *Sex i folkhemmet: RFSU:s tidiga historia*, Hedemora/Uppsala, Gidlunds.
- Lennerhed, L., (2008), *Historier om ett brott. Illegala aborter i Sverige på 1900-talet*, Stockholm, Atlas.
- Lewin, L., (2017), *Ideologi och strategi. Svensk politik under 130 år*, Stockholm, Carlssons.
- Myrdal, A., & Myrdal, G., (1935), *Kris i befolkningsfrågan*, Stockholm, Bonniers.
- Ohlsson, P., (2014), *Svensk politik*, Lund, Historiska Media.
- Palonen, K., (2019), *Parliamentary thinking. Procedure, rhetoric and time*, Cham.
- Vatz, R., (1973), "The Myth of the Rhetorical situation", in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 3:1973.
- Vessman, S., (1928), "De socialistiska kvinnornas internationella rådplägning", in *Morgonbris* 11:1928.
- Williams, D., (2016), *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement before Roe v. Wade*, New York Oxford University Press.