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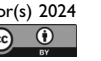

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Fresh meat: Women's motivations to hunt and how they challenge hunting structures

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Abstract

Hunting has a unique status as a sport and leisure activity alongside its practices having high stakes for society related to ecology, biosecurity, animal welfare and public safety. As such, hunting must increasingly legitimate itself before the public both in terms of ethically justifiable motivations for why to hunt and ethical standards for how to hunt. One way in which public acceptance has been sought in recent years has been to frontline 'women hunters' as the hunting community's indirect ambassadors. An effort to recruit more women is also seen as imperative to the survival of hunting in a practical, demographic sense. When women enter hunting, they enter an arena that is opaque and difficult to navigate along with heavy baggage from gender roles, expectations about proximity to wildlife and nature, and masculine norms on behaviour. In this study, we demonstrate through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and auto-ethnography of a hunting license education in Sweden, how women navigate spaces carved out for men. The findings show traps of emphasised femininity, expectations of women as 'softening influences' on male hunters to rein in their potentially unethical behaviour, and as differentially positioned in the learning process of hunting. However, using Bourdieu's social capital, findings also reveal that women negotiate and trade attributes in creative ways – such as landownership, meat handling skills and knowledge – to gain an advantage, status or level the playing field. We argue that regardless of gender, being in a position of sufficient capital to be able to call out unethical behaviour in the hunting team is crucial insofar as it serves the hunting community's ultimate interest.

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Introduction

Hunting follows with wider societal developments and demographic change (Cartmill, 1996; Danell et al., 2016; Persson, 1981). One significant such development is the increased participation of women in fields that were previously male-dominated. Due to increased personal disposable income and freedom to spend their time on chosen activities, more women in Sweden and other western societies are joining hunting (Eriksson et al., 2018; Gigliotti and Metcalf, 2016; Hansson-Forman et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2022). However, not all of them go on to lease hunting permits afterwards, meaning that they not go on to actively hunt (Hansson-Forman et al., 2020). Due to declining numbers in active hunters, retention of new hunters has become a concern and focus for the community (Eriksson et al., 2018) and women have become a demographic of interest in terms of sustaining hunting participation. In their research on the motivations, confidence and self-efficacy of female hunters in the US, Smith et al. (2022) call for research that focuses on women who are beginning to hunt and those who have not yet started. For these authors, self-efficacy, denoting the belief people have in their personal abilities, is highly relevant to hunting but also crucial to female empowerment and status (Smith et al., 2022; Stange, 2005).

Hunting is and has historically been associated with machismo and masculinities (Cartmill, 1996; Danell et al., 2016; Smalley, 2005). It is a cultural context that is arguably slow to change, still hedged to a large part by traditions in the handling of wildlife as well as social codes. Women entering the hunting arena thus face enduring structures and norms. Research shows that women struggle with finding encouragement and confidence to get involved in the activity (Hansson-Forman et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2022), feeling unwelcome or not belonging (Borgen and Skogen, 2013; Smith et al., 2022) or, in more extreme cases, discriminated against (Baralt et al., 2004; Bichel, 2021). At the same time, the hunting community and organisations ostensibly call for women's participation.

Women are having both unintentional and intentional effects on hunting culture and praxis. Furthermore, studies have revealed that many hunters are often attracted to hunting through the ability to acquire game meat (Gigliotti and Metcalf, 2016). This has also been found for Sweden (Hansson-Forman et al., 2020). Whilst women's connection to hunting has traditionally been through preparing the meat that men brought home, they now have access to hunting it themselves and thus also the opportunity to experience other aspects of hunting. However, upon entering hunting women are admitted into a 'specific operational environment' (Mykrä et al., 2017: 10) that comes with a complex, changing system of informal norms that structure hunters' behaviour. Some of these norms are grounded in hegemonic masculinity. As this paper will show, women negotiate these in several ways and so end up changing the social dynamics of a hunting team. We consequently explore women's motivations to hunt and how these women are negotiating, challenging and changing hunting structures and ethics. In revealing gender norms that face women, we also uncover and reveal norms of masculinity.

The study is based on sixteen in-depth interviews and participant observation of women who are learning to hunt and those who are experienced alongside their hunting mentors and instructors. These findings are triangulated with an auto-ethnographic study undertaken by the first author, who explores the hunting experience through the perspective of a young female of similar age and gender as several of the participants. In contrast to studies on women already in hunting, we ask: how do women *enter* hunting? What challenges do they face, and in an unwitting capacity as a change agent (Nentwich et al., 2015), what does their presence do to hunting? To answer

this question, we leverage Bourdieu's forms of capital. We aim to show how women deploy and negotiate through economic, cultural and social capital in ways that empower or marginalise them within hunting teams.

Modern history and the entrenching of gender bias

There is a pervasive idea that hunting forms a last bastion of masculinity that is seen as a safe space for men, a respite from modern life (including wife and work), and infused with nostalgia and conservative traditionalism (Borgen and Skogen, 2013; Bye, 2003; Cartmill, 1996; Jerlström, 2018; Ortega y Gasset, 1972). Older narratives of evolutionary ancestors and hunter gatherer communities often categorise the male 'hunter' and the female 'gatherer' (Danell et al., 2016). They also cement the male role in hunting as one of violence and war such as 'The Killer Ape' theory of the mid 1900s (Cartmill, 1996). Old anthropological studies highlighted female reproduction as arguments for the female inability to hunt. These studies put forward hypotheses based in child-care (Bird et al., 2012; Cartmill, 1996; Kjellson and Sörlin, 2016) or, even, argued that female bodily odours during stages of reproduction would threaten hunting success (Rios, 1978).

More recently studies into traditional divisions of labour within anthropology have shifted from 'normative to pluralistic models of human behaviour' (Panter-Brick, 2002: 638). Studies also show that women in the ancient past participated in hunting large game as well as gathering (Kjellson and Sörlin, 2016). Therefore, the relatively modern masculinised view of hunting is argued by revisionists to be a derivative of the 1800s and the Romantic into the Victorian era (Kjellson and Sörlin, 2016). The influence of the romantic era which highlighted rugged masculinity, frontier primitivism and bare bones conditions of living close to and of nature (Cartmill, 1996; Russell, 2008) is an ideal that remains today.

Prior to the first world war, women in Sweden and much of Europe were often encouraged to escort men during hunts, for their good company (Kjellson and Sörlin, 2016) as well as their 'restraint and respectability' (Smalley, 2005: 184) that encouraged civility in hunting and even enhanced manliness by contrast. It was at the onset of the Second World War that the aggressively masculine picture of sport hunting emerged (Smalley, 2005), one where war propaganda 'exalted male hunters as good soldiers, protectors of the country and rough men' (Giacomelli and Gibbert, 2018: 166). At this time hunting magazines asserted 'legitimate hunting in gender-specific terms that excluded women, asserting that women could not possibly understand the deeper cultural meanings men derived from the hunt' (Smalley, 2005: 184). Although some known female hunters challenged these norms such as Annie Oakley in the USA (1860–1928) and later Karen von Blixen (1885–1962), women hunting were seen as eccentricities (Stange, 2005).

In the present, women hunters therefore enter hunting partially with this baggage. They also enter hunting with the co-evolving legacy of male identities in hunting, which are, at the same time, becoming more complex and hybridised, at times reverting to more extreme forms of traditional masculinity (Borgen and Skogen, 2013; Bye, 2003). Moreover, although women are now able to hunt independently and participate fully in hunts and not just as escorts, they face the issue that despite challenging traditional gender roles by hunting they instead fall in a category of 'emphasised femininity'. Emphasised femininity occurs because the women who are hunting are still conforming to the desires of their male counterparts to be able to participate. This may be especially clear in women hunters broadcasting their activity on social media platforms. These women are increasingly sponsored by hunting brands and receive large followings, who are often male and remark upon their looks and their ability to stay feminine or, as an influencer herself remarks, 'glamorous' (Golder, 2021), whilst practicing hunting. Other research has shown how weapons, women and hunted animals are referred to using similar sexualised terminology, objectifying women to the point where they are spoken of in the same terms as meat or

hunting tools by some male hunters and in hunting magazines (Baralt et al., 2004). Indicating that objects, animals and women are of interchangeable relevance and status, and that femaleness is just accepted under sexually objectified sub-standards.

In this critical vein, conforming to emphasised femininity is one way of conforming for women hunters. But it can also take the shape of following with male banter, or not mentioning gender oppression (Grubbström and Powell, 2020). Women may, for example, also actively try to blend in by not highlighting gender as an issue (Baublyte et al., 2019). This means that women who challenge stereotypical gender roles by working in male dominated sectors still end up accommodating men and support their domination (Fitzgerald, 2005; Giacomelli and Gibbert, 2018; Woloshyn et al., 2013). Studies also show that new women hunters experience older generations unwilling to accept women as hunters parallel to a posturing and 'macho' culture amongst younger male hunters (Tickle et al., 2022). It therefore comes as no surprise that women have tried to distance themselves from the dominating gender roles today, often by identifying themselves as just a 'person' or a 'hunter' instead of 'huntress' (Mahoney, 2020). However, the distancing from their feminine identity and adopting an aggressively masculine one can be a counterproductive endorsement of extremes and tropes. Such tropes can take forms such as necrocentric relationships with nature that value domination and killing rather than others who would identify hunting with ecofeminist associated forms of care (Kheel, 1996).

The dynamics of (gender) roles and ethics in hunting

A general image exists of hunting as an 'escape from modern society' (Ortega y Gasset, 1972) – including from power pressures – that many literary figures, philosophers and other figureheads have expressed. Whilst hunting alone could provide a kind of solace, hunting in a team, through team dynamics and social pressure, suggests it is not entirely an escape. Granting hunting in Sweden is framed as an egalitarian 'folk' hunting rather than deriving from the aristocracy, hunting team members may be subject to other stratifying mechanisms. To Hammitt et al. (1989) and Bronner (2004) the most common is for the hunting team to enter into an 'experience-based hierarchy with inter-generational familial overtones' (Bronner, 2004: 37). The hierarchical and familial overtones of the hunting team (and often community) thus subject individuals to certain social roles within the team.

Gender, too, plays a significant part in this hierarchy. Strategies by which women hunters have navigated hunting as a male space include campaigns on social media. In 2020, a Swedish 'me too' derived movement in hunting with the handle @PatronUr (in forestry as #slutavverkat (Grubbström and Powell, 2020)) featured female hunters sending in anonymous recounting of experiences of discrimination and sexual harassment. They face these difficulties since they are actively pursuing and trying to break through dominant stereotyping stemming from decades of questioning their abilities in outdoor sports (Evans et al., 2023) and even a history of female biology being portrayed as passive, dependent and wasteful in comparison to males (Martin, 1991).

Today these theories are challenged and condemned alongside shifts in social values regarding for example, animal welfare and nature conservation, that question the legitimacy of hunting (Franklin and White, 2001). Therefore, an avenue by which hunters have sought to legitimate their hunting, apart from espousing wildlife management, has been to promote the sustainability of game meat. The latter is considered by many to be a more ethical, sustainable, and healthy alternative to industrially produced meat (Hansson-Forman et al., 2020; Kagervall, 2014; Ljung, 2014). Here, it is interesting to note that studies have shown that women generally have a stronger motivation to hunt for meat compared to men (Gigliotti and Metcalf, 2016). Only a few hunting motives, linked to utilitarian values, find acceptability among the public, and hunting for food is a central one of them (Fischer et al., 2013). This means that hunters need to tread carefully not only concerning

why they hunt, but how they hunt. It is this negotiating and enforcing of norms of propriety and ethical conduct within a hunting team that may be precarious considering internal hierarchies.

In other words, the ability of hunters to scrutinise behaviours amongst themselves is governed by social power structures and can be explained to some extent by Bourdieu's forms of *capital*. Using Bourdieu's concept of capital means understanding the hunting team as a *field* in which relations between positions of power structure team dynamics. The deeply engrained skills, dispositions and habits in Swedish hunting can be interpreted as the *habitus,* which is affected by capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). A person raised in a hunting context will retain several forms of capital significant to their position in a hunting team. The fundamental forms of cultural, social, and economic capital all feature within hunting, and are indicative of how positions are negotiated within the hunting community and team. Economic capital can be converted into money and even institutionalised as landownership. Cultural capital often comes in the form of educational qualifications and is possible to convert to economic capital in some conditions. Finally, social capital is made up of social networks (connections or obligations), can be institutionalised in the form of a noble title and, again in certain conditions, be converted to economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Although each form is never entirely separate from the others, economic capital forms a root of the other two and a type of conversion rate (Bourdieu, 1986).

The theory regarding forms of capital suits hunting as it operates along heritage, access to land and social connections. Negotiating forms of capital through transactions and exchanges is not always a smooth process and can take a length of time as cultural capital is not gained immediately through the expenditure of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). People with urban backgrounds, and especially from Stockholm, are often disparaged within Swedish hunting circles (von Essen et al., 2019; von Essen and Tickle, 2020), forming another case where origin and heritage factor in to judge a person's status through a type of cultural capital. Therefore, as in other parts of society, cultural positions and acceptance often take a long time to acquire. Cultural capital is part of what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic power', where tacit modes of domination are exercised through understated measures such as language or gestures that people are themselves probably unaware of yet are significant indicators of social status and power (Bourdieu, 1991). Gender adds another dimension to the negotiation of capital and an individual's symbolic power as hunting remains predominantly male and favours masculine characteristics and behaviours. Hence, forms of capital are useful to analyse how members within the hunting community negotiate their positions and affect each other's practices, particularly when considering how women may consolidate their positions to challenge existing structures within hunting. This study therefore explores women's journeys into hunting through the motivations that drive them to continue and how concepts of capital and symbolic power aid in highlighting challenges, exchanges and changes that take place as they interact within the hunting community. We conclude on how women communicate their values, consider, and consolidate their positions and the effect that their growing presence has on hunting.

Methodology

Most of the research on women in contemporary hunting is based on quantitative methods, and these studies have called for further, qualitative research into the topic (Gigliotti and Metcalf, 2016; Hansson-Forman et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2022). Consequently, a combination of qualitative phenomenological methods was used in this study, including interviews, focus groups, participant observation and an auto-ethnography of the hunting exam process. The study constitutes a part of a broader research project examining the impact of societal trends on hunting ethics, during which the role of women emerged as a key theme. In an equally inductive manner, this study identified the theme of 'wild meat' as a motivation for women hunters through its findings.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews allow for in depth exploration of social dynamics within the hunting community (Fontana and Frey, 2005) and comprise the main data for the analysis and are the source for the citations in the results section. These interviews were conducted with members of hunting teams until reaching a saturation point in answers (Flick, 2017). Questions were also informed by knowledge gained from field studies and auto-ethnographic work on hunting detailed in the subsection below. Individual interviews were selected for this group of people as they lasted longer (one-and-a-half to three hours), allowed for more detailed conversations with people from more varied demographic groups and individuals felt more open to discuss personal issues and situations related to gender compared to focus groups. Only four out of a total sixteen individuals (ages: 20 to 60+) were female and all these female interviewees were under the age of thirty-five years. Although most of the interviews were thus with male hunters, we focused on dimensions that brought out gender: by focusing on our female participants, the answers from their hunting instructors and mentors, and those of other (male) mentors who spoke of new female hunters they mentored. In this way, we approximate if not a female voice, then several avenues to arrive at findings relevant to women hunters in various ways.

Focus group discussions

There were a total of 7 focus groups involving about 35 people with groups consisting of 4 to 6 individuals, which took place at agricultural colleges with students enrolled in a hunting focused curriculum. Focus groups were chosen as the most effective way of encouraging younger participants to speak and facilitated a larger variation of dialogue and answers since the participants could interact with one another. All seven focus groups were conducted with young hunting students from sixteen to eighteen years of age, of which only four of the participants in the various groups were female. The ratio of male to female participants reflects the overall distribution in the hunting community. Each of the participants at these colleges had hunting experience through the college and some earlier from their upbringing. The first author facilitated the groups by posing open-ended questions and encouraging interaction between group members as well as everyone to participate to some degree. The sessions lasted up to one hour in line with recommendations for groups of that size and demographic (Daley, 2013). Young hunters are an underrepresented group in the hunting community since the average age of hunters has fluctuated at around fifty years (Eriksson et al., 2018).

Auto-ethnography and field observations

Additionally, field observations of several hunts were conducted as well as an auto-ethnography of the theoretical and practical hunting exams. This was part of a systematic process of immersion into hunting between 2018–2022. Observation of hunting took place on seven occasions before and during the hunting license ethnography, where the first author followed hunters (individual occasions with two males and one female) and observed the hunting process whilst taking notes and interacting with hunters.

Collating data in Nvivo

The results were coded using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software using thematic analysis by the first author who worked in several iterations, starting from familiarisation with the data until it was focused and refined into select nodes containing coded data. Transcripts and field notes were

entered into the Nvivo software where they were coded according to patterns as 'themes' (Braun and Clarke, 2006) that were subsequently categorised into three sections in the following results chapter. These three subsections are: (1) 'issues from gendering roles', (2) 'negotiating a place in the team' and (3) 'motivations to hunt as enacting ethical values'. Altogether they demonstrate how gender manifested itself in hunting, how social positions were negotiated in the hunting team and community and finally argumentations for why women were learning to hunt focusing on the acquisition of meat.

Findings: The female presence

Issues from gendering roles

The gender stereotyping of hunting quickly became visible upon probing. In terms of historically enduring stereotypes, one interviewee recounted how she at first had an older male partner who hunted extensively and displayed very rugged, capable and 'macho' behaviour especially in a hunting context such as killing encountered traffic-injured wildlife with a knife. Nor did he encourage her to become a hunter, which otherwise is a common segue for women to become hunters (Eriksson et al., 2018):

> **R17:** *… well, there I also met a man who I lived with for five years and he hunts a lot. But at that point I was very like, ah hunting is for men. (Female, new hunter)*

Eventually the same interviewee decided to take the hunting exams after having split from her former hunter-partner. Nevertheless, despite there being a prevalent image (and sometimes opinion) that hunting is an activity only for men, the participants in this research were all optimistic about the increase in female hunters.

> ***R21:*** *And you can say that, that now we have a lot more girls is really fun because it's significantly more pleasant around the fire and the conversation becomes different and not so macho. And I think it's been better for both the guys and the girls that way.'(Male, hunting mentor)*

A younger but experienced female hunter remarked upon women being used to buffer the boisterousness of men in a hunting context. Paraphrasing what was said: 'if you have two rowdy boys in a class, a standard practice is to put a girl in between them to break them up'. The conversation added that this should not be a woman's responsibility yet is something women are used for. This was highly criticised, insofar as it reflected the previous 'softening influence of women' attitude within hunting. Other interviewees, regardless of their demographic characteristics, likewise remarked upon 'macho' behaviour associated to male roles, usually to point out showy and reckless types of behaviour by unethical hunters, who confidently doubled down on their faux pas rather than show remorse.

Gendered differentiating in hunting, however, did not only affect women. When talking to a male instructor 'R14', he said that in general, the girls in his classes were better at theoretical learning compared to the boys, but the boys had less trouble with practical skills. The instructor added a story where one girl who dated a boy in the same hunting course helped him pass the theory exam he had been struggling with. There were many similar cases of people helping each other with hunting whether male or female; however, since many hunters are male, they also form a common ground for introducing females they are in a relationship with to hunting. Hunting is therefore something that is often done with the support of someone else. Interestingly, another side to macho behaviour in hunting had a repressive and debilitating function for males as well:

R21: *And it turned out that he was very shy about going to the shooting range and scared of making a fool of himself in front of people at the shooting range. (Male, hunting mentor)*

Here the same instructor recalled an incident where a male student was wary of making mistakes in front of others at the shooting range. Due to such pressures, male hunters may sometimes miss out on learning opportunities and obtaining skills since they are worried or afraid of appearing incapable. Hence, generalisations and stereotyping gender roles can have effects on both men and women, such as men expected to be confident and skilled whilst women are theoretical and sensible. These types of gendered perspectives can likewise result in various forms of ethical fallout such as the resistance to train skills in fear of judgement or failure to assert oneself due to doubts about skills or experience. Nevertheless, the fear of making mistakes is strong and common in hunting due to the potentially serious ethical effects. Depending on the mistake, it may have larger implications than personal embarrassment, often affecting the entire team one is hunting with such as having to call on a search for an injured animal from a bad shot. Mistakes can involve safety as well, including severe injury to animals or colleagues, both of which have grave personal and intrapersonal ethical repercussions. Clearly understanding one's needs and abilities was therefore essential no matter the gender, it just appeared to manifest itself in various ways:

R15: *But I don't feel entirely. I shouldn't say satisfied but like, I don't feel entirely satisfied and secure. I wouldn't want, well, but go out into the woods and be held accountable for what I say or do. Because I wouldn't feel one hundred percent sure yet. And that's why I feel that I don't want to go out [hunting] yet. Because I want to become a little more secure, or I don't want to go out with a rifle, but I would like to go out. I think you learn best, that is, on location.*
(Female, new hunter)

Learning theory and passing some tests on the shooting range is not considered enough to prepare someone for hunting, as expressed in several ways by a large majority of study participants. Insecurities about skills cut in several ways and caused some to require help in practical situations and other to hide their need for help. The indication was that new hunters wanted or needed more help than was given, and would have liked more support from social networks. Experiences from the autoethnography echoed the requirement for support and encouragement, especially when signing up to participate actively in hunts. Mentorship was an important question for these hunters, not least as old structures of inheriting hunting within family networks are not available to a large group of hunters, who depend on other networks. However, the male majority of hunters was overpowering when compared to the availability of social female contact networks as well as female mentors and instructors. Even though many respondents and the autoethnographic work indicated that women believed themselves to lack hunting contacts and desired mentorship, they did not want advantages or special treatment because they were women:

R18: *there is this 'Jakt Q'. Hunting but with Q (JAQT). Which is a hunting team for girls. But there, I've only been on their Instagram and follow them there. And I'm a little like this, of principle kind of don't want to join anything just because I'm a girl. But on the other hand, they seemed to be very open, that you didn't have to know anyone.*
(Female, new hunter)

Here, support was desired but not special treatment. Special treatment had many implications often to do with ability and skill, which is perhaps why research participants tended to dislike the idea. Similar to the quote above by 'R21', judgements about abilities created a negative spiral where less access or willingness to engage in practical learning prevent hunters from improving their skills.

Research participants and other encounters with female hunters revealed that although women were open to instruction, they were also sometimes underestimated and felt that their gender affected their treatment negatively by being considered lesser to their male counterparts. Special treatment, such as lower expectations and easier tasks, providing a perceived advantage over male hunters was an idea that most female participants actively tried to discourage, instead choosing to work towards gaining skill, contacts and reputation.

Negotiating a position in the team

The auto-ethnographic experience revealed that encouragement to start hunting could be a contributing factor towards the decision to actively hunt. During the data collection phase there were women who were actively searching for contacts, mentorship, and access to a hunting team as well as land. The hunting team and social contacts with other hunters are essential in Swedish hunting, providing access to land, hunts, knowledge, equipment and many other necessities. Many are interested in hunting but access to hunting networks and a team membership is often difficult for those who do not initially have such connections. Nevertheless, the difficulties may not end when being invited to a hunt or even joining a hunting team. A female participant in her thirties reflected on her experiences from recently joining a hunting team consisting only of men who are all above sixty years old:

Interviewer: *What did they think about having a woman in the team?*
Respondent: *The first time, someone who wasn't usually there clearly said, 'it's not always that a hunting team improves by having women in the team.'*
Interviewer: *Did he say that to you directly?*
Respondent: *He looked at me but said it to everyone.*
Interviewer: *How did that feel?*
Respondent: *'But now I'm already here so it should be alright, you'll see.' That was the most subtly dismissive thing I could say, I think… but that's how it is, I don't own my own land. If I did, I might have questioned it more directly, but I know that's part of it.*
Interviewer: *What do you mean by 'part of it'?*
Respondent: *When you enter the game, you have to accept the game, I don't think you can change it from the outside … I think I'm free to question as I want, it's a fantastic forum to be a part of and see a group dynamic that you don't come into contact with if you don't hunt, sitting around the fire and talking is fantastic, I feel very privileged to be a part of it.*

In the exchange above the participant faced resistance from men when entering a new hunting team and had to take care to participate without 'rocking the boat' or as she put it, if you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen. Another key point in the quote above was the mention of landownership potentially empowering her position in the team to the extent that she would not have been as accommodating to someone who was being confrontational if she had owned hunting ground herself. This meant that at the time she did not feel she was in a position to take the remark further and confront the team member about it. Nevertheless, she still felt she could raise questions regarding hunting ethics in the context of safety and animal welfare, which may be more accepted talk than that of gender in that context.

Generally, the auto-ethnography and interviews implied that in a hunting team, which is a prolonged relation often lasting many years, pointing out issues can ruin your status in the team and your relationship to other members. The experience likewise evoked images of judgmental

finger wagging, especially as a woman since tropes of disapproving, entitled 'Karens' or 'nagging women' come to mind. During the auto-ethnographic research, at the practical examination stage and during the last days before the exam, there was a group of people preparing which was comprised only of men, the female researcher and a female instructor. It was a pleasant experience, and support from team members happened in the form of yelling encouraging words to each other. The positive group dynamic was disrupted at one point when the first author pointed out that instances of bad language towards animals and cursing the target could manifest in disrespect and potentially unethical behaviour towards hunted animals, an issue she had encountered in her research (see Tickle et al., 2022). The main issue being that the researcher broke the repertoire and group dynamic by being critical, no matter how people might interpret the situation, it did put the researcher in a more awkward and vulnerable position in the group.

In another case, 'R23' remarked that she failed her practical exam but when an old man made the same mistake as her (not lowering the shotgun enough between turns) he passed. When she brought up this discrepancy, the examiner decided to let her pass as well. On the other hand, in talks with experienced female hunters, stories of being underestimated or overlooked surfaced: For example, female hunters in their thirties were told how to field-dress an animal despite extensive qualifications in slaughter and butchering.

Gender can parallel and intersect with other inequalities and identities. It was suggested that as women become more prominent in hunting, they may also explore ways to consolidate their position within hunting and the hunting team beyond skills:

> ***R14:*** *However, in a hunting team, where I'm from, it's much worse. Because there the landowners are very important. And we have had a landowner up there who we start to get, one of these important landowners as they say [laugh] who has poor judgement. Has poor control of his, has poor impulse control. All hunting teams have someone like that whom you get a little scared of when you hear that they're shooting. But if he's a landowner, then it becomes a dilemma. You can't exclude him because then you lose an important part of the hunting land as well. (Male, hunting instructor)*

The last sentence highlights that certain identities or attributes as a hunter can empower you above your peers, despite being a poor hunter. A similar point was made in the earlier interview with 'R23' who saw landownership as a potential way to empower her position to the point where she did not have to accommodate truculent behaviour from other team members.

Motivations to hunt as enacting ethical values

Six out of the eight female respondents made explicit reference to hunting for meat for several reasons but mostly in relation to animal welfare. Several women intimated that how one relates to the meat reflected one's personal hunting ethics:

> ***R15:*** *Yes, wild meat, they live well until they are shot. So that's why I took the hunting exam to become a little more self-sufficient and avoid buying pork that's in production instead, so that's where the interest began. (Female, new hunter)*

Greater knowledge about and insight into farming and animal welfare was credited by these hunters as part of their decision to start hunting for meat – as an ethical alternative to farming and industrial meat production, emphasising among other things, animal welfare since wild animals get to live free according to their instincts. The procurement and production of meat was additionally mentioned by the women as promoting self-sufficiency in themselves. Attaining such self-sufficiency

then translated into personal feelings of competence and self-efficacy for many women hunters. Proving one's abilities to others, such as hunting peers, was important. Nonetheless, these answers also signalled the importance of self-realisation: allowing one to live along with moral convictions, especially when participant 'R18' says 'It is like, a meat that I can stand for'. Killing for meat may be understood by many new hunters, women included, as a justifiable rationale.

Whilst meat appeared a strong motivation for women hunters, it did not form the exclusive motivation to hunt. In one focus group animal welfare was expressed as highly important to a female respondent, but she did not link her hunting interest to meat consumption. Similarly, whilst another participant ('R23') expressed interest in game meat, she also conceded enjoyment in target practice as an important factor for starting:

> ***R23:*** *Just got interested in it [hunting]. In the beginning it was the pleasure of shooting clay pigeons. And that there is no hare available in the shops - More the acceptance of eating that kind of meat. It's good meat, hare too. (Female, new hunter)*

Supporting 'the hunter' evolutionary hypothesis, she also suggested that the recent popularity of veganism and vegetarianism among women in particular was problematic from a nutritional point of view:

> ***R23:*** *The thing with the fact that we need lots of different proteins but there are nine proteins we can't synthesize ourselves, but these are found in animals and game too and my kids don't eat beans so it's not a choice. (Female, new hunter)*

Another respondent pointed to accommodating these societal trends around vegetarian diets despite of one's conviction and personal investment in hunting:

> ***R21:*** *Ah. And it is. I also have a stepdaughter who is a vegetarian for animal ethical reasons, but, it went great because I accepted her and treated her with respect and had separate surface on the grill and, separate tools and with that she also respected that I hunt. (Male, hunting mentor)*

He added that the process of accommodation and acceptance went both ways:

> *And she's even gone so far as to ask me to help her give her husband hunting exam training as a birthday present a number of years ago. (Male, hunting mentor)*

Finally, killing for meat appeared justifiable only insofar as it adhered to animal welfare standards including the hunting principle of minimising unnecessary suffering:

> ***R17:*** *I know there was a bird that flew into my mother's house once, a tiny bird, and it was injured in the wing. And mother was absolutely terrified so I picked it up in my hand and like 'now I'm going to let it out' but then I thought, this one is injured, this one will die. I will have to wring its neck, because that is the most humane thing! But it looked at me and it was so damn cute, so I couldn't, I couldn't twist its neck. And then come the thoughts like, 'how do I wring the neck of an animal?', 'Will I cause more suffering?', Will it die immediately? So I let it go on the ground, and then a cat came and played with it, like. So it was, I guess it still haunts me. (Female, new hunter)*

The participant above is troubled by her inability to end the suffering of an injured bird, and links this to a wish to gain the ability not only to kill for ethical meat, as she mentions before, but also to make the difficult yet considerate decision of granting a quick and relatively painless death. This quote points to the importance of facing the unpleasant in the hunt and not leaving unsavoury bits to others as well as investing in her own abilities, perhaps gain confidence to take such a tough decision and carry it out personally. It also highlights the necessary overcoming of squeamishness on the part of women as hunters, proving again that these are not male-only jobs and an ethical responsibility that women should and can carry as well.

Discussion: Disrupting hunting structures and/by enforcing values

The first part of the discussion centres around the female experience and how the ability to kill and procure meat is being rediscovered by women, their motivations for doing so and how hunting for meat reflects values. The second part addresses women negotiating structures within the hunting community as well as relationships to other hunters, and how they affect hunting in various ways both consciously and unconsciously.

Slay queen! – Regain the confidence to kill and …

Although women have in recent history been discouraged to hunt, several have defied these norms and gender roles by continuing whether it was high game or killing small animals to supplement the household. Now modern women have increased access to nature, freedom of movement and an increasing interest in hunting (Eriksson et al., 2018; Hansson-Forman et al., 2020). However, as the results show, even if a woman may not face overt issues of sexualisation, women hunters recounted being underestimated or mistreated. In the field of the hunting team, gendered norms manifest themselves in various forms of symbolic power such as social capital, where masculine identities and comradery are dominant and more accepted than feminine traits. Based on participant narratives and observations of Swedish hunting, currently much, if not most, of the hunting community and environment places the female gender as central to a female hunter's identity, obscuring much of the individual, such as their capabilities. This study shows signs that there is a type of tacit acceptance of masculine culture, whether it is men unwilling to appear amateurish or women toughing out abject behaviour such as participant 'R23' when she first joined her hunting team. Despite women (and men) having to deal with negative occurrences of (hyper) masculinity, they nevertheless persevere, gain experience and contacts as they espouse hunting and build their self-efficacy, meaning their confidence in their abilities as hunters (Smith et al., 2022).

Research shows that women in the US need robust social support to help them take the step towards actively starting to hunt (Smith et al., 2022) and 'the more experience a woman has hunting, the more confident she is […] with every year hunting, women gained more confidence in their skills than their confidence based on social support' (Smith et al., 2022: 5). Considering the wish for more mentoring and guidance by participants as well as the discrimination some women faced, providing early-stage support for women would be an effective strategy both for long term retention and the empowerment of women in hunting. Encouraging self-efficacy is possible through practical experience according to both this and previous research (Smith et al., 2022; Tickle et al., 2022) and cannot be replaced by theoretical knowledge, since the transition between license and active hunting is demonstrably a difficult one. Especially**,** since women are less likely to believe they are sufficiently qualified compared to men (Fox and Lawless, 2011).

Considering that hunting teams tend to recruit new members using invisible and informal criteria (Anderson, 2020; Bye, 2003) captured in the concept of habitus, the masculine dominance leads to

new male hunters often being favoured through informal connections and friendships. Women have therefore started to create their own forums and networks to encourage and support more women to hunt and provide some respite from the dominant masculine attitudes such as the female hunting network 'JAQT'. The JAQT network, as mentioned by participant 'R18', puts female hunters in touch with each other and organises events specifically for women. Although some may view women-exclusive networks as special treatment (R18: 'I don't want to become member of something just because I am a girl'), considering the underrepresentation of women in hunting, such networks can be argued as necessary to increase female presence and influence in the hunting community and potentially raise the social capital of females within individual hunting teams. This reflects a general sentiment amongst female hunters, that although they want support, they do not want to be given an advantage. As several experienced female hunters shared that they often felt underestimated due to their sex/gender, there is a tenuous relationship where women need support and help during the start, but as they develop self-efficacy and skills they are subsequently misjudged by their male counterparts. Female hunters may therefore experience a tension between being given perceived advantages versus accepting support to improve their hunting skill and not risk making grave mistakes that could cause unnecessary suffering to animals and impact their teammates. The desire to not be perceived as gaining advantage or special treatment could also be tied to self-efficacy where confidence is gained through skill and any allusion to gaining a special advantage could work to nullify such otherwise valuable achievements.

It stands to say that self-efficacy and confidence may translate into other parts of one's life which help female empowerment as more women are able to embody as well as prove their capabilities outdoors. This connection has been drawn by female hunters in the past such as 'the Girl from Wyoming' Alberta Claire in the early 1900s who prized her right to vote and linked her liberty to ride, shoot and rope with women's political equality (Stange, 2005).

Another significant benefit of hunting is that it provides access to wildlife as an experience and as a resource. The results revealed a significant desire towards hunting for ethical meat based on ethical values regarding animal treatment and welfare. Hunting as well includes stewarding and management skills (and efforts) that can support animal survival and provide a quick death if judged necessary. For participant 'R17', hunting correlated with an ethical conviction to be able to euthanise an animal and stop its suffering - not relying on others to do so. Similar benefits can be claimed for the participants who hunt for access to meat they consider ethical and can control the process in which it is obtained. Hence skills in hunting**,** interpreted as a form of cultural capital within hunting communities and teams that highly value and critique the knowledge and practices of other hunters**,** are needed to follow through on these ethical convictions.

Meat in hunting has a symbolic value and exposes relationships between hunters as well as hunters and wildlife. Women hunting for meat out of consideration for animal welfare (so called ethical meat), as supported in the results, linked their interest in hunting with their ethics. Here, animal welfare was interpreted in a minimalist and negative rights focused way, emphasising wild animals right to free unencumbered lives and hunters' duty to minimise their suffering upon killing them. In other quantitative studies, women have as well shown that they are more interested in hunting for meat than men, who tend to be driven by slightly more varied motives such as companionship, nature experience or excitement (Gigliotti and Metcalf, 2016; Presser and Taylor, 2011). On the other hand, whilst the sharing of game meat through social relations raises the acceptance and thus the legitimacy of hunting in Swedish society (Ljung, 2014), for-the-pot or 'filling the freezer' hunting aimed at survival and the acquisition of meat without regards for the animal and welfare leads to unethical hunting practices (Marvin, 2013, 2006).

A disregard for the process of acquiring meat, focusing only on the shooting, and thus ending the hunt after the kill whilst letting others take care of the carcass processing also appears frowned upon by hunters as well as the broader public (Fischer et al., 2013; Tickle et al., 2022). It is disparaged as

'slob' hunting (Kuentzel, 1994), which also appears to be triggered by external and internal factors, such as the kind of game one is after, the cumulative excitement of the situation, and the local hunting culture. The divide is often seen in terms of separating 'shooters' from hunters (Causey, 1989; Cohen, 2012; Vitali, 2010). The value for ethical meat could translate into a more holistic hunting practice by embracing the full hunting process, including field dressing and butchering. They may therefore be said to be more in accordance with 'honest' ideas around meat and the reality of death that accompanies it (Tickle, 2019; von Essen and Allen, 2021). In our study, women linked the benefits of game meat both to self-sufficiency and as nutrition. The latter point is gaining more societal-wide popularity, with studies now describing game meat as more ethical, nutritious and sustainable than industrially produced meat (Kagervall, 2014; Ljung et al., 2012; McCaulou, 2014). Whilst this necrocentric understanding of animal 'care' is contested, arguing that not killing would be better (Fitzgerald, 2005; Kheel, 1996), within the realm of meat consumption reflected by respondents, obtaining your own meat through hunting is widely supported if the death is quick (Ljung, 2014; Tickle et al., 2022). Importantly, the link to game meat qualifies women as toilers involved in the whole process of procuring meat, which at post-mortem includes transporting, field dressing, butchering, preparing the meat and other parts of the animal. Given that a source of internal conflict and differentiation among the Swedish hunting community at present is between hunters who only step in for the 'fun stuff' and the proud toilers (von Essen and Tickle, 2020), women may feel that they gain capital by leveraging this role.

… reclaim your place to hunt

Bourdieu's forms of social capital are helpful to think with in terms of clarifying the steering logics by which norms are enforced in the hunting team. If women's participation in hunting continues to grow this may break up some of the older, sticky roles in the hunting team (and by extension, community). Women's entry into hunting appears to do more things, however. Some are less subversive. As in the above results, the increased presence of women is still seen as having a softening effect on 'macho' and boisterous male behaviour. The softening influence, as already mentioned, a heritage from the Victorian era was still present when speaking of women joining the hunting teams. Some welcomed this insofar as it broke up the kind of macho behaviour that encouraged recklessness. In some ways, then, the presence of women may have been said to lay the groundwork for hybrid masculinities to be enacted.

Nevertheless, to others, placing women in this softening role was seen as a frustrating generational holdover. Hunting as a male dominated community is facilitating a concentrated gendered culture that can threaten ethical standards such as the most 'dangerous' drivers being young males when together in a car (The Swedish Transport Agency, 2017) or, as in another study, when a female hunter witnessed that her male hunter colleague took a more risky shot than she thought was ethically correct (Tickle et al., 2022). The expectation that women will regulate macho behaviour unconsciously or consciously, seems unrealistic especially if they are already in a weaker position within the team. It is therefore important to highlight that although there are several positive effects that can be expected from more women reclaiming a place in hunting (Pérez-González et al., 2023), it is not their responsibility to uphold the ethical level of the hunting team, whether it is behaviour towards colleagues or towards wildlife. Instead, these responsibilities are better suited to figures with more authority and designated positions for responsibility - regardless of their gender. Indeed, the hunting leader has intuitively been found as the more significant regulator of ethical behaviours than laws and principles (von Essen and Hansen, 2018).

Participant R23's statement that if she were to own land, she might be less tolerant of abrasive behaviour of one team member is an example of plans to consolidate power through landownership to strengthen one's voice and position. Participant R14's quote however shows how overpowering

landowning team members can be in the hunting context, even to the point of sloppy behaviour going unchecked because of one's landed status. The weight of various capital is therefore quite pronounced in hunting and women will look to strengthen their positions in the hunting team through similar exchanges of social, cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1991, 1986). Although it has been argued that the symbolic power of gender cannot be overcome by mere economic means (Bourdieu, 1991), within the hunting team the strength attributed to owning land appears to heavily buffer one's position in a hunting team. Landownership essentially is invested economic capital that in the context of hunting potentially can transfer to social and/or cultural capital, empowering the individual with hunting rights, social significance or perhaps cultural belonging linked to landscape attachment and knowledge of the area and its wildlife. Whilst the hunting cultures of the Nordic countries were historically much less marked by class than continental-European and British ones (Danell et al., 2016), and access to land (and hence hunting rights) were not necessarily tied to nobility or wealth, there still exist stratifying mechanisms within it. The contemporary landowner who has all rights to the wildlife and meat, has now for example been argued to form a 'landowner aristocracy' (Andersson Cederholm and Sjöholm, 2021). Recent statistics show female owners are decreasing as large private landowners are growing in number (Nylander, 2022). Since landownership is significant to hunting rights and position, women's influence may be declining along with that of a diversity of landowners, enforcing the (dominantly male) landowner aristocracy theory.

Conclusion: A woman's touch? – Challenging and changing existing structures

The reverberations of an increasing female presence in hunting are manifold. We gather three main verdicts and deductions from our study. First, women should be able to hunt without having their gender become central to their identity as hunters, obscuring their individuality. The issues that arise from emphasised femininity have effects beyond the discomfort of female hunters, indeed resulting in the inability to judge the needs and skills of individuals accurately, both male and female. Female capacities and skills are underestimated and overlooked whilst males are potentially overestimated (by others or themselves). These effects have potential high stakes, insofar as hunting conduct does not take place in a self-contained leisure space, but affects wildlife ecology, animal welfare, biosecurity and public safety.

Second, to understand women and femininities in hunting, one must also understand its space and function for the enactment of masculinities. Unlike the former, however, research on the latter is relatively frequent. But femininities also need to be studied not as change agents and backgrounds to masculinities, but as undergoing change in tandem with them. Today, hunting has become a bastion for, among other things, gun-loving conservatives and neo-traditionalists (Bergman, 2005; von Essen and Allen, 2017). What this does to women in hunting is only just revealing itself.

Third, our study discovered that there is presently an uneasy balance between promotion and encouragement in relation to women hunters in the hunting community: as poster-girls or special needs students. Above all, we note a paradox: women are outwardly encouraged to become hunters and are disproportionately provided this ambassadorial position in for example social media. Perhaps in times of a precarious public legitimacy of hunting, they add to its image as progressive, inclusive, and modern. Inwardly, however, women's actual chances of being invited to hunt and, once inside, have enough power to assert ethical beliefs and correct disrespectful behaviour remain quite low.

Highlights

- Efforts to gain public acceptance have involved highlighting 'women hunters' as representatives of the hunting community.

- Emphasised femininity and gender roles affect women's experiences in hunting.
- Expectations exist for women to act as 'softening influences' on male hunters' behaviour.
- Women leverage social capital, such as landownership and skills, to gain advantage and status in hunting.
- Gender and power relations should not hinder individuals from addressing unethical behaviour within hunting teams.

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