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# SAVE KORTEDALA LIBRARY

## Gendering Practices in Urban Activism

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## **Abstract**

The aim of the study was to discuss conditions for urban activism, through looking at the interest group Save Kortedala Library and its gendering practices. The aim was furthermore to examine the role Kortedala Library plays for the community as well as to relate Save Kortedala Library to a larger context of resistance to neoliberalism. To do this, I have conducted four semi-structured interviews and done three participatory observations.

I have concluded that the library is important for the community and has a multitude of functions. I also argue that the library is feminized through a number of practices which would make the budget cuts it has been subjected to a patriarchal practice as well as one of neoliberalism. The interest group, which was formed to protest the cuts, has similarities to movements resisting neoliberal policies in countries such as South Africa, Romania and the US, and can thus be said to be part of a bigger struggle. I have also found a number of gendering practices related to questions of visibility, recognition and caring/responsibility. Challenging those practices can give the group better chances to grow and survive over time.

**Keywords:** Urban movements, Gender performativity, Neoliberalism, Neighborhood activism, Libraries.

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# 1. Introduction

The libraries are the cornerstone in our welfare system and democracy. Libraries are junction points for mass education. My mother used to borrow books for my brother and me there. We were the best in our classes at vocabulary and spelling. Without libraries I wouldn't exist, in some sense – A Kortedala resident in the 2018 petition to save the library.\*

When I was little, I used to love going to the library, which was about a 15-minute walk from where I lived. I do not really remember the staff, but what I do recall is a feeling of familiarity and calmness. I grew up in a poor household in a working-class neighborhood. My mother was on a long-term sick leave and we didn't have a lot of resources. My home environment was anything but calm. It was chaotic, unpredictable. I never knew whether it would be a good day or a bad one when I came home from school.

My childhood was in many ways difficult and often lacked responsible adults, but what I had was my books. I read a lot and through reading I discovered the possibility of other realities, which made me believe that my life could be different, that something else was possible. There is no way to measure how much that has mattered to me. The library, the books, gave me knowledge, hope and stability. The fact that the library was so close to where I lived made it possible for me to go there on my own, without the company of an adult. It was quite small, located nearby, and it was free of charge. All of those things mattered. All of those things still matter.

At the time of writing this thesis another library, located in Kortedala, a suburb in Gothenburg (Sweden), has been subjected to substantial budget cuts resulting in fewer opening-hours and a reduced number of employees. Kortedala, built in the 1950s, was the first suburb to Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city. It is a working-class suburb, with 17 131 inhabitants (Göteborgs Stad 2017).

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\* All quotes from the interviews, observations and the petition have been translated from Swedish to English by me.

Why is the library in Kortedala important? The library is a place for borrowing books, it is a place for children's activities, it is a calm study environment for those who lack one at home. It is a place for using computers, printing important documents required for welfare applications. It is a social space, where people can meet, talk, play chess. Where those who are lonely can find some human contact. A society needs public spaces that are open and free of charge, especially in socio-economically weak neighborhoods. The cuts of the library is part of a pattern that excludes some and benefits others.



Kortedala Library, seen to the left, located at Kortedala Square.

The placement of the library affects the neighborhood as a whole. It is “the heart of Kortedala square” as a resident formulated it. The suburbs need more, not less, positive spaces like libraries.

I have chosen to focus on the gendering practices of the activist group ‘Save Kortedala Library’, a group which I will describe further in the next section. It is a perspective that I argue is essential to understanding the conditions for resistance, the starting point being that resistance to cuts of the publicly owned such as public libraries is both necessary and important. A gender perspective cannot be “added”; the gendering practices cannot be

separated from other activist practices. The gendering practices are embedded in the very core of every political movement and affect how successful a movement can become. That is the point of departure for this study.

## **1.1 Background**

Gothenburg is a socioeconomically segregated city. The difference in average disposable income between the working-class suburb Bergsjön and the richer Långedrag is 270 000 SEK per year. The difference in life expectancy between the poorest neighborhoods in Bergsjön, Angered, and Kortedala and the richer parts of Gothenburg is 7,5 years for women and up to 9,1 years for men. There are also significant differences in self experienced health between the poorest and the richest areas of Gothenburg. 55% of residents in Nya Frölunda classify their health as good, which can be compared to 82% in Stora Sigfridsplan. The gap between the richest and the poorest is growing. Sweden is often described as one of the most economically equal countries in the world, but the income gap is growing in a faster rate than in many other countries (Jämlikhetsrapporten 2017). The class differences are obvious.

Cuts and centralizations of public services in the city affect the working-class suburbs the most. Kortedala is one of those suburbs, located in the eastern part of Gothenburg. In December of 2017 it was decided that the sector responsible for culture in the district of Eastern Gothenburg (Stadsdelsförvaltningen Östra Göteborg) was going to make cuts for 12 million SEK. These cuts would affect mainly Kulturskolan, which offers affordable classes in music, dance, theater and other artistic subjects for children and young adults, and the public library in Kortedala. There were plans of moving the library from the square of the residential area to a smaller, less visible space as well as of heavily limiting the opening hours and reducing the number of employees. The decision sparked a powerful response from the residents in Kortedala. An interest group called Save Kortedala Library (translated from Swedish) took form and began organizing resistance. In December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017 a Facebook group for the cause was created, which by 2019-01-30 had 1612 members. Activists also collected over 4000 signatures from residents in Kortedala protesting the cuts of their public library. Here are a few of the comments added to the petition:

“I grew up in Kortedala and the library was my haven. I went there at least once a week to

borrow books”

“I think local meeting places that are not about consumption are really important and rare”

“It’s important to have a library in the local area. A big library such as the one in Kortedala definitely shouldn’t close down. Are the residents in Kortedala supposed to go to Gamlestan? Many people won’t, especially not the children. Now that there is a densification of settlements around the Kortedala square the library is needed more than ever”

The list of signatures was then delivered to the district council (Stadsdelsnämnden Östra Göteborg) during their meeting in January 2018. Hundreds of activists gathered for a protest outside of the meeting (Sundström 2018). The responsible politicians have since changed their stance of wanting to move the library from the space at the Kortedala Square, but cuts have been made regarding opening-hours and number of employees.

The library is not only a place for borrowing books, but also for language cafés, children’s activities, computer help, help with homework and a place for leisure and social life. Before the cuts were made, the library had around 1000 visitors per day (Holmgren 2017). It is safe to say that the library plays a central role in the community.

In this thesis I will frequently use the term *neoliberalism* to contextualize and understand the practices that I see. Neoliberalism could be explained as, in David Harvey’s words (2007:2), “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.” Harvey (2007) further describes its overall objective to be to expand and create new markets, sometimes using state means but at the same time demanding as little state intervention as possible. In short, you could say it is a “market above all” ideological standpoint.

The interest group that is Save Kortedala Library could be seen as part of a bigger resistance to a neoliberal policy of cuts that mainly affects the working-class suburbs of Gothenburg.

## **1.2 Aim and Research Questions**

The aim of the study is to discuss conditions for urban activism through looking at the interest group Save Kortedala Library, with a focus on the group's gendering practices and how those practices can be challenged. The aim is furthermore to examine the role Kortedala Library plays for the community as well as to relate the cause of Save Kortedala Library to a larger context of resistance to a neoliberal policy of cuts.

Research questions:

1. How can the meaning that Kortedala Library has for the community be understood in relation to neoliberalism and the construction of gender?
2. How does Save Kortedala Library's practices relate to the general neoliberal development in Gothenburg and can the group be understood as part of a bigger resistance to such a development?
3. What are the group's gendering practices that hinder the development and sustainment of the group and how could such practices be challenged?

## **2. Research Overview**

Gothenburg is one of Europe's most segregated cities (Thörn & Thörn 2017), where neighborhoods are gentrified, the working-class are pushed further and further away from the city center, and inequalities between 'the rich' and 'the poor' are growing. Resources are transferred from the peripheral neighborhoods to the city's core.

The changes to Kortedala library is part of a much larger pattern of segregation and cuts of the public good, in Sweden as well as in many other countries. There have been disruptive protests against capitalism/neoliberal policies all around the world. We have seen resistance in countries such as Romania, through a series of protests against privatizations of the health care system (Burean & Badescu 2014), Spain, in Madrid's housing movement (Gonick 2016), Poland and its tenants' movement (Jeziarska & Polanska 2018), in the US, with the anti-Trump movement (Fisher, Jasny & Dow 2018), in the square movements in Egypt, Greece and the United Kingdom (Ishkanian & Glasius 2018), as well as in riots in Swedish suburbs (Schierup, Ålund & Kings 2014; Sernhede 2014; Ålund 2014).



Gonick (2016) studied Madrid's housing movement and identified two strategies of action: Radical autonomy and agonistic engagement. The latter seeks solutions within the existing system while radical autonomy dismisses the system completely and strives to break it down in order to build something new. Gonick (2016:210) proposes a combination between these two, at first sight opposite, strategies "in the broader quest for emancipation from neoliberal state rule". A movement with a similar agenda, but within a post-soviet context, is the Polish tenants' movement, a reaction to increased housing privatizations. Jezierska and Polanska (2018) discuss collective claims and identities within the movement and focus on the articulation of demands which, in the case of the tenants' movement, have shifted from a redistribution perspective to a question of recognition; being recognized as legitimate tenants. The authors use the radical framework of Laclau & Mouffe to examine the movement's processes towards creating a collective identity, through naming "the other" and linking together different groups that share an antagonist as well as previously mentioned collective claims.

Clare Saunders (2008) claims that collective identities form on group rather than movement level and that the forming of a collective identity is not necessarily unifying for a movement. The author argues that those processes could fragmentize movements and create animosity between organizations within the same movement. One of three environmental organizations studied by Saunders (2008) is Environmental Direct Action Group (EDAG), a relatively small group with around 20 activists but with over a 100 supporters. The group has a radical anti-capitalist standpoint with loose or no formal structures. There are no formal leaders, but, as Saunders (2008:241) explains, "certain individuals fall into roles". Decisions in the group are made at meetings "on a consensus basis". The group shows high levels of internal solidarity, which is described as "sectarian". Saunders (2008) concludes that it is neither desirable nor possible for an entire movement to share a collective identity and that high levels of internal solidarity within groups could lead to fractions and disunify movements.

Ishaknian and Glasius (2018) looked at square movements in three different cities: Cairo, Athens and London, all with the common objective to protest a politics of austerity. The authors found similarities in the activists' critique of society where several interviewed activists expressed a fundamental incompatibility between capitalism and their conception of

democracy. Despite this common basis for the struggle, the movements have become fragmented due to lack of coherence in terms of strategies (Ishaknian and Glasius 2018).

The authors above have made important contributions to the field of social movements, but they lack a gender perspective. Fisher et al. (2018) apply more of a gender perspective in their studies of four large protests part of *the Resistance*, a movement directed at the Trump administration, and found a multitude of motivations among the protesters. The interviewed protesters mobilized around a shared concern, (the Women's march, the march for science, people's climate march and march for racial justice) but expressed many different reasons for being at the marches. The authors discuss women's rights and reproductive rights, recurring motivations in each march studied, as a potential bridge between different social issues.

All of these protest movements have not been explicitly or consistently anti-capitalist, but they have de facto been reactions to capitalist mechanisms and neoliberal changes in society.

In a Swedish context, there are several studies made on disruptive movements focused on riots, car burning, stone throwing and other extreme or direct forms of disruption. Schierup et al. (2014), Sernhede (2014) and Ålund (2014) contextualize the riots in disadvantaged neighborhoods in Sweden 2009 and the riots in the suburb Husby 2013. Sweden has undergone a neoliberal transition and become more market oriented, which in turn has increased the class divisions. Swedish cities are segregated into wealthier neighborhoods with a good reputation and the "badlands" (Ålund 2014) i. e. the working-class suburbs, that are characterized by high levels of unemployment, low income households, marginalization, securitization and state intervention as well as stigmatization (Schierup et al. 2014; Sernhede 2014; Ålund 2014).

Studies of segregation in Swedish cities, such as Gothenburg, have often focused on young people, and in particular young men. Ove Sernhede (2011; 2014) has studied youth cultures, such as hip hop collectives in Swedish suburbs, and have made important contributions to the understanding of Gothenburg as a city as well as alterative "schools" that produce knowledge, but gender remains undertheorized.

My ambition is to study the neighborhood initiative Save Kortedala Library in this context of segregation, gentrification and cuts of public services in Gothenburg. I want to look at ways of organizing resistance from this local, small scale perspective, partly because the “small” issues matter; resources and access to public spaces in a neighborhood matter to those who live there, and partly because of how it is connected to the bigger picture where a multitude of urban movements are disrupting neoliberal politics for the few.

Libraries play an important part in creating equal opportunities. Neuman and Celano (2001) write that there is a well-known connection between socioeconomic status and school achievements, which to some extent can be explained by different reading habits. Middle-income families tend to read more to their children than low-income families, but the authors argue that this might be a proxy for other societal events and structures. Children who go to schools in richer neighborhoods tend to have better material preconditions for both reading and school success. Neuman and Celano (2001) examined access to print in different neighborhoods in Philadelphia (US) and found that there were differences between neighborhoods in their public libraries: in their general collection, in the number of books per child as well as in opening-hours. They argue that efforts for child literacy must include resources for childcare, school libraries and public libraries. Interesting examples of the impact public libraries can have for individuals as well as communities are the Library Parks in Medellin, Colombia. Through constructing large and inclusive public libraries, that offer far more than books, the administration managed to change the trend in what was then one of the world’s most dangerous cities. Building the Medellin Library Parks (MLP) was a strategy to bring down violence and social inequalities. The MLP have become social spaces for education, meaningful leisure, culture, creation and entrepreneurship (Granda and Machin-Mastromatteo 2018).

I hope to contribute to studies of urban movements through using a gender perspective when studying this particular form of suburban resistance. Gendering practices can affect and be part of a movement’s strategies (Sparks 2016; Kuumba 2002; Dodson 2015; Verschuur 2009), claims (Sparks 2016; Velasquez 2011), motivations (Kuumba 2002; Velasquez 2011), what can be said and done (Sparks 2016), status and leadership positions (Kuumba 2002; Verschuur 2009; Goebel 2011), and who’s assigned “carer positions” in a movement

(Kuumba 2002; Verschuur 2009; Goebel 2011). The point of departure for this thesis is the assumption that a gender perspective, illuminating gendering practices and formulating strategies to manage or change them, could help create the conditions needed for the long-term survival and expansion of a movement.

Gendering practices, as well as practices related to other power orders, shape what positions that legitimately can be taken and what claims are considered reasonable as well as relevant, both to the individual activist and to 'the struggle'. Power practices, such as the ones based on gender, affect how those claims or demands are received and how one is treated or heard (Sparks 2016). Holloway Sparks (2016) writes about the US Welfare movement where activists were subjected to sexist and racist stereotyping as a way of silencing them. Goebel (2011), who writes about protest movements in South Africa, discusses the fact that although most grassroots movement members are female, leadership positions are often held by men. Furthermore the author explains that women tend to be responsible for household work and their families which hinders them from taking a big part in political movements, but, as the author also points out, even when they are politically active it is difficult for them to receive the same kind of recognition as men.

Kuumba (2002) examined women's activism in the civil rights movements (US) and the anti-apartheid movement (South Africa) and argues that both movements were gender-integrated, meaning there were high levels of involvement of both women and men in the official structures. Looking more closely at each movement did however show that men and women had different statuses and roles and that female-led organizations were not as visible, and did not receive as much attention, as the male-led ones. Just as Goebel (2011), Kuumba (2002) argues that women, both in a South African and an American context, tend to be more active in grassroots activism, this due to a general interest for and commitment to community and family concerns as well as limited access to leadership positions in male-dominated organizations. These types of more informal mobilizations are less valued and visible than the officially recognized, often male-led, organizations (Kuumba 2002). Christine Verschuur (2009) similarly argues that women in urban contexts often organize in grassroots "neighborhood movements", and that this type of activism usually has a low status and does not receive much recognition. Kuumba (2002) argues that gender ideology is embedded in

social action and that it affects what actions are considered legitimate; what can be said and done.

Dodson (2015), in line with Kuumba (2002), argues that gender ideology is crucial for understanding activist practices. In a study of gendered activism across seven “advanced capitalist democracies”, Dodson (2015) found that women generally tend to partake more in non-confrontational types of protests, but in “egalitarian contexts”, in this case Norway, Finland and Sweden, the gender gap (in confrontational versus nonconfrontational practices) was not statistically significant. The author writes that the countries which had a more traditional orientation in regard to gender also showed bigger gender gaps in the different types of activism.

Returning to the topic of grassroots activism, Juan Velasquez (2011) discusses grassroots mobilizations in Caracas, Venezuela and describes how women in the *barrios* have in many ways been a driving force for change. Local community councils have formed where the “barriowomen” take on leading roles in strengthening the community and working against poverty and discrimination. Women in this context could be said to be more aware of their communities’ needs and how different everyday problems arise, which might explain their extensive participation in grassroots activism – something which not only helps sustain and build the communities but also holds the potential to challenge official, often patriarchal, structures (Velasquez 2011).

Velasquez (2007) has also studied and participated in a form of neighborhood activism in a Swedish context – the working-class suburb Fittja, outside of Stockholm, where over 47 languages are spoken. He discusses the conditions for what he calls “förrtsfeminism”, or *suburban feminism* (my transl.). Women’s low political participation in Fittja is described as a result of bad health, domestic violence, having sole responsibility for the children, and issues related to languages well as the labor market. Velasquez (2007) moreover argues that many people living in these working-class suburbs perceive themselves as marginalized subjects that do not matter to “the political establishment”, and that they therefore choose not to vote and participate in official political structures.

Another issue brought up by Velasquez (2007) is how some of the women lacked the educational background and language skills needed to be able to help their children with homework. This makes the children in Fittja disadvantaged in comparison with middle class families that have Swedish as their native language. Furthermore, Velasquez (2007) writes that the women who participated in the study reported a lack of meeting places for women, arguing that the city's resources often go to activities which benefit men.

Public libraries could be seen as female-coded spaces. 80 percent of librarians at public libraries are women and 62 percent of book borrowers are women (National Library of Sweden 2017). Using those numbers as a starting point it is possible to assume that it is mostly women who use the public libraries as meeting spaces as well. Audunson, Essmat & Aabo (2011) suggest that public libraries are inclusive meeting spaces that can be used by immigrant women to build social capital.

Kuumba (2002), Verschuur (2009), Goebel (2011), Dodson (2015), Velasquez (2007; 2011) and Sparks (2016) have all connected gender with activism or social movements, but further study is needed to show how gendering practices are embedded in social movements and how they can impact the success or failure of a movement.

### **3. Theory**

The theoretical basis for this thesis is a performative understanding of gender. The performative perspective can be used to understand the library's subversive potential and how repetition and habits performed within the framework of the library create necessary preconditions for education, better school results and better life chances. The performative perspective on gender is also useful for understanding Save Kortedala Library's gendering practices and how they exist within and uphold an internal system of dominance; a system that needs the reiterations of practices, meaning it is inherently unstable. This perspective can help identify practices that gender code both bodies as well as places, but also to uncover the potential to challenge those norms.

### 3.1 Performativity and Subjectification

Gender is constructed through a repetition of acts or practices which affirm existing ideas about what gender is (Butler 1990/2007). We constantly *do* gender. Judith Butler (1990/2007) introduces us to her theory of gender performance in *Gender Trouble* and discusses how these practices are a way of making sense of ourselves as well as of others as subjects. In *Gender Trouble* Butler (1990/2007) does not make a distinction between sex and gender; they are deemed inseparable and both social constructions in the sense that the categories are given their meaning and are understood in the social sphere. Separating them could risk cementing what often are seen as biological facts. There is a common notion that gendered norms derive from biology, which Butler (1990/2007) rejects. Butler (1990/2007) has received some criticism for minimizing the significance of the materiality bodies in *Gender Trouble*. In her later work *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993/2011) elaborates her reasoning into a theoretical approach which takes materiality into account.

*Sex* materializes through reiterations of norms. It is a process, rather than a question of stable, naturally given categories. Inherent in this performative process is the potential to challenge the norms. The fact that the process of materialization requires the constant repetitions or reiterations shows that it is unstable and possible to change. Yes, bodies are material, or rather materialized, but through power practices of reiterating norms that uphold a heterosexual narrative or script. This process is what make us understandable subjects (or incomprehensible if we stray from the script). There is a biological reality, but it is formed, regulated and made sense of through power practices. (Butler 1993/2011).

Paolo Freire (1970/2000) who writes about education/political action discusses the forming of political subjects as a process which includes an awareness of the limitations of one's situation, not as a fatalistic truth but as an unstable process that can be challenged.

Furthermore, this process of political subjectification requires that the oppressed are in charge of the process of inquiry and part of the decision making. If one is not active in these processes, if it someone else that decides what information is important and pushes it forward in a one way-direction, as opposed to having *dialogue*, one is made an object and is in a sense stripped of one's very humanity. Similar to Butler (1993/2011) Freire's (1970/2000) reasoning behind subjectification is about how we are humanized, or in Butler's (1990/2007;

1993/2011) case gendered, and the conditions for change. The instabilities of any power system is what gives hope for change, what gives room for challenging it. How political subjects and political consciousness is formed is relevant to this thesis because the basis of it, as I have previously stated, is about the conditions for political change and organized resistance, in this case in the form of urban movements.

### **3.2 Gender and Masculinities**

Connell (2009) writes that organizations have *gender regimes*, which regulate the (gender) divide of tasks and different roles that are available within the organizations. These gender regimes are located in the larger structure that is society's patriarchal gender order. A social structure consists of individuals who perform different practices that enforce the structure. There is a gender divide in paid work as well as in household, unpaid, work, where those who are coded as women in society tend to be responsible for caring for children and taking care of the household. This role comes with a set of characteristics that are expected of women: Loving, caring, self-sacrificing, being-for-others (Connell 2009). Parallel with the image of the woman as caring and emotional, is the idea of the man as the bearer of rationality and objective knowledge, which Connell (2005) describes as a recurring theme in European philosophy and Western popular culture. If the home is made a feminine sphere, *science* and technology are masculinized.

In her notable work *Masculinities*, Connell (2005) writes that there are several masculinities, rather than *a* masculinity, and that they are part of a hierarchy or a system of dominance. Connell (2005) argues that the concept of masculinity is relational in its nature; it exists only in contrast to femininity. Furthermore she stresses the importance of not only recognizing masculinities as diverse but also understanding how they relate to each other in terms of hegemony/dominance and subordination. *Hegemonic masculinity* is the type of masculinity that is culturally encouraged and legitimized by for example the state. Which type of masculinity that is hegemonic, and favored by society, changes depending on the historical and cultural context. Hegemonic masculinity is relational and "embodies a currently accepted strategy" (Connell 2005:77). It is directly derived from power orders and the people who have the most power in society. This favored ideal or image is not constant, but it becomes hegemonic when the claims to power are successful (Connell 2005). The state, with its



institutions, and masculinity are therefore tightly interlinked.

In summary, power structures and practices are crucial for determining how gender functions and is expressed. Masculinities, as well as femininities, are results of the patriarchal power order. Hegemonic masculinity is both created by the patriarchy and used to legitimize it.

### **3.3 Gender and Neoliberalism**

“You must make everything that is yours saleable, i.e., useful.” (Marx in *The Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts*, 1932/2003)

Economy is tightly interlinked with gender. In *The German Ideology*, Marx describes every society’s mode of production as in itself a productive force which forms our social realities, including gender and family formations (see also e.g. Engel’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* and Marx’ *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*). Ideology cannot be separated from our material realities. The ruling class, or those who hold the material power are also the ones who have power over thought; their ideological principles are made hegemonic.

Giritli Nygren and Nyhlén (2016) describe neoliberalism as a combination of a capitalist system and an ideological rationality, where the state serves the market rather than its citizens. Neoliberalism is not just normative, in that it puts market interest and economic growth first, but is also violently productive and creates new markets where there previously weren’t any. There is an active movement towards increasing marketization of the public sector, eg. In health care and education (Sawyer and Fahlgren 2016).

Both neoliberalism and society’s gender order are not stable facts but something that need constant reiterations in order to exist. Both processes construct the human, what it means to be human, to fit the hegemonic ideas. The human is produced as entrepreneur, as a gendered being, as inherently competitive and so on. Individualism is a strong principle in a neoliberal discourse, where it becomes the individual’s own responsibility to take charge of their life (Martinsson 2016; Fahlgren, S., Mulinari, D., & Sjöstedt Landén, A. 2016). The neoliberal focus on individual choice renders structures, that can only be changed through systemic

efforts, invisible. Fahlgren et al. (2016) argue that the concept of gender equality has become de-politicized in the neoliberal context and marketized, adjusted to fit an agenda with economic growth, not justice, as the main goal.

Fahlgren et al. (2016) also discuss how the focus on individualism can make neoliberalism appear gender neutral, but that the systems and networks it produces are nevertheless dominated by men. Furthermore they write that the neoliberal objective of a 'flexible' job market leads to an increase of insecure types of employments, where women tend to be overrepresented. Connell (2005) similarly argues that although neoliberalism is gender neutral in theory, the consequences of neoliberal reforms affect those coded as women the most. Women are more affected by welfare cuts, since there are generally more women than men depending on the welfare system. Women are more affected by a shrinking public sector, since they are generally overrepresented in terms of employment there.

Returning to the discussion on masculinities, Connell (2009) argues that masculinity/-ies also exist on an institutional or organizational level, meaning that gender structures are often embedded in organizations and institutions. They are often constructed by powerful men, based on masculine principles. Giritli Nygren and Nyhlén (2016) write that the private sector, as well as the public (the state), is subjected to gendering processes. The private sector is often described in masculine coded words such as effective, risk-taking and determined, while the public sector tends to be described with words such as inefficient, passive and weak traditionally related to the construction of femininities. This process of gendering, the authors argue, can be said to feminize the state. Thus, not only individuals are gendered but also organizations, professions and even the state.

Before presenting my choices of methods and the results of the study, I want to include a disclaimer of sorts. Gender is not binary. The patriarchal binary man-woman and practices stemming from it is an oppressive framework within which we are constructed as understandable subjects (or not understandable, if we do not conform with the gendered norms). Our bodies, and to some extent even places, are gendered based on that false binary. Gender is not binary, but the patriarchy is. Bodies that are coded as 'female' are the oppressed part in relation to bodies coded as 'male'. Of course, this binary also affects those who do not

'fit' in these categories, not seldomly resulting in both institutional and interpersonal violence, but for the purpose of this thesis I choose to sometimes apply a binary language. My ambition is to avoid essentialization of the categories 'woman' and 'man' as much as possible, but I have chosen *not* to avoid those categorizations completely since I see them as necessary in understanding patriarchal practices. Sometimes the use of gender binary language is also a reflection of the research I refer to, if they are based on that categorization. Another example of when I will be using a binary language is when I refer to official statistics which has been produced from a binary perspective (probably based on Swedish social security numbers, which are automatically coded as either male or female).

## **4. Method**

This is a qualitative study based on participant observation and semi-structured interviewing. I have conducted 4 in-depth interviews and three observations. The collection of data as well as the analysis of the results have been performed with a feminist approach, focusing on the gendering practices within the group.

### **4.1 Procedure**

I have chosen to use participant observation, as discussed by Davis & Craven (2016), as a basis for the study. They describe the method as the researcher being intensely involved with the group they wish to study, making extensive and detailed field notes and at the same time being reflexive of their own participation. I have made three participatory observations. The observations have been paired with 4 in-depth interviews à one hour with selected members of the interest group. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning there has been an interview guide as a basis for each interview, with room for some flexibility, e.g. changing the order of the questions and adding or skipping questions as you go (Bryman 2011).

The study is inspired by Participatory Action Research (PAR). Fals-Borda (1987) describes PAR as a practice for building awareness for social change, combining scientific research, adult education and political action in order to produce knowledge. Furthermore, he writes about the philosophical concept of *vivencia*; a way of knowing through experiencing or

feeling something. Actively participating in the cause could help understanding the core of the cause in a way that could not be accomplished from an outsider “objective” research method. In PAR, he writes, this is complemented by an authentic commitment to the cause. To be part of the activism myself and not simply observe or interview, along with my previous experiences growing up, could potentially lead to different conclusions and results. Using that logic as a point of departure I have aspired to assume an observant/activist role, as opposed to simply observe as an outsider. The study has not been based on PAR, but rather inspired by its principles. I have strived to include the participants in the process as much as possible.

In collecting data and analyzing the results I have paid attention not only to what has been said, but also to potential discomfort, doubt, silences and contradictions, which according to Jackson and Mazzei (2012) is as much part of knowledge production as the explicit, more “traditional” type of data. Another tool for understanding the data is Haraway’s (1988) concept of feminist objectivity or situated knowledges. Situated knowledges, according to Haraway (1988), is based on location, embodiment and partiality, without claims to be universal but at the same time avoiding the relativistic, radically social constructive claim that there can be no objectivity at all in research. In this case it will mean recognizing and reflecting upon my specific positionality and how it affects the research as well as acknowledging the partiality of the knowledge produced in this thesis.

## **4.2 Selection**

Selecting interviewees was performed randomly in the sense that there was no specific plan for the process. The first two informants were asked to participate after they themselves approached me and initiated a conversation at the first observation. The third informant was chosen in a similar fashion; they approached me at the second observation after which I asked them for an interview. The fourth interviewee was the only person I chose with deliberation. I felt that there was something lacking in my existing material, so I chose that person for the reason of them having been active in the group from start and been an important part of planning and structuring, from a more strategic perspective.

I have chosen to not prioritize equal representation or variation, of e.g. gender, educational backgrounds and ethnic backgrounds, in my selection. Since this is a qualitative and not a

quantitative study, I am more interested in the content of each interview. Gender, racialized or class positions of the informants matter in understanding this content, but I have not had any pre-existing ideas of who I would want to interview. Through interviewing I wanted to get a sense of some of the patterns in the group. It is a partial perspective, which does not, and does not aim to, tell the whole 'truth' about the group but it can nevertheless tell us *something*.

The interviewees have for anonymity reasons each been given an alias. They are the following:

1. Anna: A white, working-class, Swedish woman in her 60s. Self-employed, with a background as a library assistant and youth center leader.
2. Bengt: A white, working-class, Swedish man in his 60s. Experience from working in the manufacturing industry as well as schools and youth centers.
3. Pia: A white, middle-class, Swedish woman in her 70s. She has a background as an educator in nursing at her university and has also worked as a nurse herself. She is now retired.
4. Sandra: A white Swedish woman in her 30s. Works as a teacher and is mother to a small child.

For the observations my wish was to be able to observe three different types of events, which would show both public and internal practices of the group. Incidentally, there were three events of different characters within my timeframe so those were naturally included in the study.

### **4.3 Analysis**

For the analysis I have followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps for making a thematic analysis of interview data. Each interview has been recorded and transcribed. Just as Braun and Clarke (2006) argue, transcribing interviews is in itself a way of familiarizing with and processing the data which lays a foundation for later analysis. After transcribing, I repeatedly read the material and searched for initial patterns. Following this step, I began coding the material, through reading the transcriptions and writing down key words in the margins. These initial codes were then sorted into themes, which were reviewed and redefined

through additional readings of the material to see how well the themes represented it. The fifth step consisted of defining and naming the themes, formulating general themes as well as a number of subthemes. The final step of this process was to produce text; to formulate the analysis in the thesis. The themes and subthemes of the interview data came down to the following:

## 5.1 The Library

### 5.1.1 Books and service

### 5.1.2 Attractive neighborhood and violence prevention

### 5.1.3 Open space

## 5.2 Political Motivations

### 5.2.1 Critique of current economic politics

### 5.2.2 Distantness and Injustice

## 5.3 Group Structures

### 5.3.1 Group composition

### 5.3.2 Decision-making

### 5.3.3 Meetings and Public Appearances

The observational data has been documented either as field notes or as transcriptions from recordings. The first observation, the flyer hand-out (2019-01-26), was documented in field notes, where I tried to write down as many details as I could remember. I wrote the notes right after the event, when it was fresh in mind, in order to get as accurate results as possible. The second observation, the protest (2019-01-31), was mainly documented with field notes but also with pictures and a recording of a speech given by one of the group members. The speech was then transcribed and included in its entirety in the result section. The final observation, the meeting (2019-03-14), was recorded and later transcribed. It was analyzed in a similar way as the interviews, starting with me reading and rereading the material and coding it, searching for patterns. The observational data has not been sorted into themes, but has been compared with the results from the interviews in order to see how they relate to each other and if there are any similarities or contradictions.

#### 4.4 Ethical Considerations

I have obtained oral consent from all of the interview participants as well as the participants at each observation. I have informed them about the purpose of the study, that they have the right to terminate their participation at any point, that the data only will be used within the framework of this thesis and that they can get access to the material collected at any time.

According to Christians (2011) feminist ethics is based on questions about power relations rather than questions of good/evil science, meaning the focus is on moral as something that is negotiated through relations in the social realm. Christians (2011) emphasizes participant inclusion in both planning and executing the research while having a *cooperative mutuality*, serving the community in some way. Mutuality in research, contributing to the movements, organizations or communities which we study, is one of five criteria for feminist ethnography suggested by Davis and Craven (2016). I have aspired to conduct the research in a way that is valuable for the purpose of the thesis as well as for the interest group. I have attempted to maintain a dialogue with the participants throughout the process and have offered them a formal opportunity to share their opinions on my preliminary results. I met with the group again 2019-05-28, at a political council meeting where the question of the library was on the agenda. I reminded one of the participants of my offer but have as of yet not received an invitation to come and present my results. Unfortunately, this means that the participants will not be able to comment or request any changes before my deadline, but I will of course remain in contact with the group and hopefully later on be able to meet with them to discuss the results.

Angrosino and Rosenberg (2011) discuss how observational studies can be used in the pursuit for social justice. The authors suggest that the researcher should have a connection to the community or the marginalized, a *kinship*, in order to avoid objectifying them in the research. They also suggest that the researcher should take on the role of an active advocate for the cause, working *with* the community rather than *for*.

I have had a reflexive approach, as understood by Olesen (2011) and Haraway (1988), to the research planning, data collection and analysis. By this I mean identifying my own social location and understanding what it means in relation to my research; how it may have affected

the responses I received during the interviews and what impact it may have had on my interpretations of the interview and observational data. An important aspect regarding my insider/outsider position is the fact that I am currently a resident in Kortedala, the location of the study. During the study I have shifted between the position of an insider/resident and an outsider/researcher. I have had a sense of kinship, from start, with the participants of the study, which according to Angrosino and Rosenberg (2011) creates good conditions for research that strives for social justice and that avoids objectification.

Edmonds-Cady's (2011) article about insider/outsider perspectives in research conducted on the Welfare Rights Movement in the U.S. explores the different positionalities of the researcher and the researched. The author discusses insider and outsider statuses of the researcher as shifting and negotiated, using her own experience as a starting point. Edmonds-Cady (2011) writes about her social position both as a middle-class white woman and as someone who grew up in a white working-class family and later, as a young adult, lived as a 'poverty class' single parent. These experiences of different social positions are described as giving the author a shifting insider/outsider position in the group of research participants. Furthermore, she argues that her background as a 'poor woman' affected her interactions with participants and writes that her own experiences of poverty were the reason for her interest in the topic of social movements for the poor.

I myself have a similar background as Edmonds-Cady (2011). I am currently a white student-going-on-middleclass woman within academia, but I grew up mainly with a poor immigrant mother. Since I have firsthand experience of living on welfare, I know how important public services and institutions are to a community and the individuals within it. While acknowledging this, I am careful not to resort to sentimentality; I do not claim to better understand the mechanisms behind poverty solely on the grounds of having self-experienced it. However, there is an intuitive aspect to my work, which may come from my background, that is about how I have met with the participants, what questions I have chosen to ask and how I have asked them. There has been a feeling, from start, of solidarity and respect towards the participants, which might have impacted how I reacted to the things I met during the study as well the process of conducting the analysis. Exactly how my background has impacted this process is difficult to pin down; it is all quite loose and speculative, but knowledge is



produced from partial perspectives and my conviction is that one's background and specific locality does affect e.g. what the researcher finds interesting and what they choose to focus on in the material. My hope is that it remains clear when reading the thesis that a class perspective is central to me; that it is my starting point.

## **5. From the Participants' Point of View**

In this segment I will be presenting and analyzing the results obtained from the interviews, which have been conducted with three women and one man, all of them white, middle- to working-class, and with a Swedish background. The results have been categorized into three main themes: The Library, Political Motivations, and Group Structures. The first two themes explore how the participants understand the library's importance for Kortedala and contextualize the activist practices within the group (the **why**). The following theme goes deeper into **how** the group functions and performs gender.

### **5.1 The Library**

This theme gathers interview responses, along with analysis, focused on the library in itself; its importance for the community as well as more personal aspects which motivate involvement in Save Kortedala Library. It contains the following subthemes: Books & Service, Attractive Neighborhood & Violence Prevention, and Open space.

#### **5.1.1 Books and Service**

The interviews show that there are both political and personal motivations behind the involvement in the group. All of the female interviewees speak of the importance of having a public library, both as a place where you can find books and as a service to the people who live nearby. They mention access to computers and printers, which, they say, is not something that everybody has access to at home. Sandra, the teacher, says that many people in Kortedala use the library to make copies of their passports, so that they can apply for residency, and print bank statements in order to be able to apply for welfare. The library is described as a place for community service. These practices described by the interviewees could in some ways be seen as something that the ideal liberal subject would do: take action to improve their own life by searching for information, printing important documents, applying for residency

and perhaps even, although not explicitly mentioned in the interviews, look for a job using the library computers. But since neoliberalism and its individualistic perspective tends to not take structure into account (see e.g. Fahlgren et al. 2016), and ignore the fact that people live under different material conditions which affects the room for individual action, it becomes easy to motivate cuts of local public libraries. That many people do not own computers for example becomes, in this line of reasoning, individual and not structural problems.

Sandra discusses what the library has meant for her as a single parent. The library, she explains, has always offered many children's activities, such as concerts, fairy tale readings and crafting. Pia, the retired nurse, argues that people, particularly children, can find role models and learn through having access to books.

Sandra says:

The library is amazing when you have children. They get the opportunity to play and find books. [My daughter] loves to read and it is really important to me that she accesses that world. As a teacher you see that the children who have grown up with books at home or... have had access to books, having parents who have read fairytales to them, that they do better in school. – Sandra (2019-03-02)

Following a heteronormative gender script, those who are characterized as women are generally responsible for children and household work (Goebel 2011; Velasquez 2007; Connell 2009). Without having exact statistics from the library's children's activities, it is possible to assume that the practice of taking children to these activities conforms with that script and is performed by those coded as women or mothers. In this context, where 'women' perform most or all of the unpaid household work, the children's activities at the library could function as a relief or help for them.

Bengt, the male interviewee, was the only one of the participants who did not bring up personal or family related aspects of having a library nearby. He focused his arguments on larger political structures and conflicts (see 5.2.1). The participants in this study can be understood to construct femininity and masculinity in accordance with the heteronormative script, where those identified as women are constructed as more family-oriented and caring

and those coded as men are constructed, using Connell's (2005) reasoning, as bearers of a detached type of rationality and objective knowledge.

Sandra's quote above, where she connects access to books to school achievements corresponds well with Neuman and Celano (2001), who argue that having functioning public libraries, with appropriate opening-hours, extensive general collections and a high amount of books per child, is an important key to child literacy and in extension school success. Reading to your children and giving them access to books early on by taking them to the library are practices that, if performed in line with a heteronormative script, could be understood as gendering, enforcing a norm where mothers are the ones who take main responsibility for the lives of their children. At the same time, they can be understood as potentially subversive in terms of destabilizing class, through giving the working-class better life chances, general education and possibly laying the foundation for class consciousness and mobilization.

### **5.1.2 Attractive Neighborhood and Violence Prevention**

Another theme that came up in the interviews was the library's role in creating a safe and attractive environment, where people want to live, and its role in preventing criminality and other problems in Kortedala. Pia compares Kortedala to a richer neighborhood where you "expect to have everything". Furthermore she says that Kortedala does not have that amount of service and culture and that you have to "care for what little you have".

Bengt expresses the following:

I don't know if you know this, but there is a space close to the library, 800 square meters, that is completely empty. It's what the staff calls "The sea of forgetfulness". I mean, so you're going to shrink the library while having a lot of other empty spaces around. It's sick. And then they complain that the young people hang around here, just like I did when I grew up here. They complain about them... At least *we* had youth centers. – Bengt (2019-02-04)

Pia argues that you should involve the young people, and let them "be part of building something" as well as ensure a safe upbringing for everybody, which, the interviewee means, would take down crime rates. Another thing that is brought up in the interviews is that the

library attracts a middle-class to Kortedala, and how important is to have “mixed” neighborhoods, and not have entire residential areas characterized by social and economic problems. Sandra points out that if the library were to shut down it might make the middle-class, who have the resources to move, leave Kortedala. She states that the library is “only one thing” but that Kortedala needs more of those types of spaces and not less.

Just as Thörn and Thörn (2017) write, Gothenburg is a segregated city with gentrified neighborhoods where the working-class is both geographically and resource-wise moved further and further away from the city center and the middle-class (and up). This is something that is pointed out by the interviewees, that the working-class suburbs, which Ålund (2014) calls the “badlands”, are characterized by social problems, and that the public library could have an impact on crime rates as well as social mixing.

The connection, made by the participants, between the library and crime rates resembles the logic behind the Medellin Library Parks, where the city’s administration constructed these large libraries/activity centers in the city’s most dangerous neighborhoods, and managed to make a significant change (Granda and Machin-Mastromatteo 2018). The results from those projects support the participants’ ideas of what role a public library can have for a community.

Pia’s statement about letting the youth in Kortedala “be part of building something” is an important one, that can be related to the discussion on the forming of political subjects. Just as Ålund (2014) describes, the “badlands”, or working-class suburbs, are often subjected to different governmental interventions, such as increased securitization. Using Freire’s (1970/2000) language, the people in those suburbs are stripped of their humanity, made into mere objects of political discourse and action; there is no real dialogue. The people in Kortedala want their library as it was, it was popular and well-functioning. Instead, the image taking form in the interviews is one where the local politicians have gone over the heads of the residents and decided what is important to them and what is not. I will return to this, and discuss some of the potential consequences, under section 5.2.2.

### 5.1.3 Open space

One thing that is emphasized in three of the interviews is how the library functions as an open, safe space for social meetings, a place where “you can feel at home” and receive service and get to talk to someone without having to spend money. Anna, the woman with the background as a library assistant, argues that those talks at the library might be “someone’s only human contact that day”. None of the interviewees connect the library as a social space to gender, but there are gendering aspects of public libraries. Numbers from The National Library of Sweden (2017) show that both a majority of librarians and as well as a majority of book borrowers are categorized as women, which could be understood as feminizing the library making it a female-coded space. Audunson, Essmat & Aabo (2011) make the claim that public libraries can be important specifically for immigrant women in building “social capital” and the women in Velasquez (2007) study argued that there was a lack of meeting spaces for women in their suburb; that there is a need for unconditioned spaces where women can meet and get to be something other than mothers. The library could be such a space for the people coded as women in Kortedala. The main problem is of course the lack of public spaces where women can feel safe and welcome. The point is not to “banish” the women in Kortedala to the library, but rather to illuminate the importance that the library can have for individuals and how it transcends the official purpose of the public library as a place where you can borrow books for free.

The retired nurse Pia describes the library as a place where you can receive help with homework. She states the following:

There aren't computers in every school [...] A teacher lives in my building and she complained to me once, we had a communal cleaning day, and she told me that there are so many really talented students, but that a couple of them fall through since they can't afford [a computer] and they live so crowdedly at home. They can't be at home and get to read and study, they have to do that someplace else. – Pia (2019-02-05)

The participants describe the library as a meeting place for different generations, where you can play chess and hang out, and have people to ask things, “people who you feel care about you”. Pia states that you “sometimes need the small, not just the big extravagant places”.

Another interviewee, Sandra, expresses that the library was her “rescue” when her child was little, and they did not have a lot of money. She says “you come here and it’s bright and nice and there are a lot of nice books and you sort of feel that ‘I am allowed to be here and feel good and [my daughter] feels good here’”.

Just like the case of the Library Parks in Medellin (Granda and Machin-Mastromatteo 2018), the interviews show that a library can be a part of creating meaningful leisure. Another important point made by the participants is the one about homework. Pia, in the quote above, mentions not being able to afford a computer and living crowdedly at home as obstructing conditions for being able to do schoolwork. Velasquez (2007) who performed a study in Fittja, a suburb with similarities to Kortedala, discusses how some of the women lacked educational background and language skills and that they therefore were unable to help their children with homework. Taking those aspects into account, having a public library, with both computers and people who can help with homework, could have an impact on school achievements and by extension life chances.

## **5.2 Political Motivations**

This theme presents the political motivations behind the interviewees’ involvement in Save Kortedala Library. The theme is divided into the following two subthemes: Critique of Current Economic Politics, and Distantness and Injustice.

### **5.2.1 Critique of Current Economic Politics**

Each one of the interview participants criticizes the economic system and cuts of the public good. Pia, the retired nurse, calls herself “apolitical”, while at the same time explaining that it was seeing the cuts of public services and experiencing the difference between the richer area, where she previously lived, and Kortedala which motivated her to get involved in the interest group.

I used to live in a very rich municipality and then I came to Kortedala and noticed that there were a lot of cuts and that the library was being attacked, by budget cuts. And then you start to think about all of the children and languages here in the neighborhood and homework

help and... I think all children should have the same right to evolve and live. — Pia (2019-02-05)

The participant may call herself “apolitical”, but as seen in the quote above there are in fact political reasons behind her involvement in the group. In contrast to the ”apolitical” activist, Bengt is openly driven by political reasons and does not have a personal approach in any of his answers. He places the library and the budget cuts in a larger context and compares it to other instances of cuts. He also discusses class differences, specifically differences in salary between office-workers and manual workers.

Femininity and masculinity are constructed in relation to each other (Connell 2005). If the library and its activities, often directed at families, are feminized Bengt’s failure to talk about personal or family related aspects could be understood as an indirect practice which conforms with hegemonic masculinity. Nevertheless, his analysis of the situation is relevant and shared by another one of the participants. Sandra also contextualizes the struggle for the library and criticizes cuts that mainly affect the suburbs and ”those who have the least money and possibilities”. She shows an awareness of the conflict of interests between workers and owners and discusses the tendency of “infighting” and putting struggles against each other, despite them being interconnected and part of the same structural problem. She describes an activist in another library group who was approached by someone saying that their ‘win’ meant less resources for other societal functions. Sandra explains:

I don’t think you should let them do that, you shouldn’t let them put societal functions against each other and say that ‘it’s your fault, you who don’t want library resources to be cut, that elder services are being cut instead.’ No, it’s not our fault, it is the economical politics in Sweden that is about wanting to reduce the public sector, that’s where the problem is. It isn’t about people engaging in different issues. It’s a good thing that people do that. If people wouldn’t protest, they would have cut down everything by now, we wouldn’t have any welfare left. — Sandra (2019-03-02)

Three of the interviewees argue that involvement in the group could lead to a greater societal awareness, where you see how different issues relate to each other. Bengt says that ”you

naturally begin to care about other resource cuts”. Sandra states that the activism for the library has created a sense of community which ”would be fun to continue with in some way”, regardless of what happens to the library. Pia, the “apolitical” activist, differs from the others in her answers and explains that she does not plan to engage in any other societal issues, but that it is just the library which feels important at the moment. Another participant, Anna, argues that the group has ”inspired library visitors in other places” and shown that “change is possible”.

What Sandra, Bengt and Anna express above is particularly interesting in terms of conditions for resistance and mobilization of the working-class. It shows that the group transcends its original cause, or that there at least is potential to move beyond the cause of saving the library. Once again, I want to relate this to Freire’s (1970/2000) concept of dialogue. The group could potentially work as a gateway to raising a general political consciousness. As shown in the interviews, there are group members who are more aware of political tensions and the mechanisms of capitalism, but from what I have been able to see they do not start with that knowledge and try to impose it on other group members; awareness is raised organically, starting from an issue that is directly related to people’s everyday lives. The group was a spontaneous initiative which seems to have created a commitment to each other and the community as well as possibly given way to a general curiosity about society. They have been working together to understand why the cuts were made, connected it to general changes in society, and formulated demands, through creating the petition, protesting, and talking to local politicians.

All of the participants in the interviews show an awareness of the societal structures behind the cuts of the library. In their responses they analyze the library in relation to a general development and present an image where library’s functions and purpose does not fit within or conform with the political strategies practiced in the city. The libraries are rendered irrelevant in a neoliberal context which only cares about economic growth and market interests. Save Kortedala Library is hardly a movement in itself, but based on how the interviewees describe their motivations behind participating in the group it could become part of a larger movement; it definitely has similarities to the protests discussed in the research conducted by Burean & Badescu (2014), Gonick (2016), Jeziarska & Polanska (2018), Fisher



et al. (2018), Ishkanian & Glasius (2018), Schierup et al. (2014), Sernhede (2014) and Ålund (2014).

The interviewees do not make gendered conclusions regarding the city's politics, but neoliberalism is gendered and gendering in a number of ways. Neoliberalism and gender are connected in the sense that those who are categorized as women usually are the ones who are most affected, in a negative way, by neoliberal reforms. They are also connected through the fact that neoliberal systems and networks tend to go in line with and enforce the patriarchal power order, in that they are driven by 'masculine' principles and have powerful 'men' on top of the hierarchies (Connell 2005; Fahlgren, Mulinari & Sjöstedt Landén 2016; Giritli Nygren & Nyhlén 2016). Previously in the thesis it has been established that most librarians are coded as women, which means that they are directly affected by cuts of library budgets. Moreover, if we understand public libraries to be feminized, based on the assumed gendered composition of librarians as well as most of the book borrowers, and use Connell's (2009) description of institutional masculinity, the cuts of the library could be interpreted as a patriarchal practice as well as one of neoliberalism.

### **5.2.2 Distantness and Injustice**

A general theme in the interviews was what I have chosen to call "distantness", referring to a "us and them"-mentality where the interviewees describe political, economic and geographical distances between groups of people and how those differences are fundamentally unjust. Sandra describes the geographical as well as economical distance between the suburb and the inner-city as follows: "If you live out here (in the suburb) and you don't own a car or have a high income and a lot of money, you don't go in to the city every day, or even every week. It takes too much energy and costs too much money and time". She continues:

You move to the big city because you think that there are a lot of things to do here, but it's not like that. It takes money, it takes living in the inner-city. You sort of end up at the 'countryside' here as well, but worse because there is no forest and there are a lot of problems... neighbors who drink and children you see that make you worry about their home situation and... it's hard, you know. – Sandra (2019-03-02)

The quote above can be compared to what Schierup et al. (2014), Sernhede (2014) and Ålund (2014) write about the Swedish suburbs and the problems of high levels of unemployment, marginalization and stigmatization. There is a clear line between the city center and what Ålund (2014) calls “the badlands”.

The retired nurse Pia brings up the differences she discovered while moving from a rich area to the suburb, where she saw that the latter was exposed to “a lot of cuts”. The participant discusses the unjust conditions for students in different schools, depending on where in the city they are located. Further she argues that the city politics has changed from looking after the “vulnerable” individual to focusing on “the big and fancy”, thereby expressing an incompatibility between her values and the current economic strategies. Pia’s understanding of the general development goes in line with what Ålund (2014) writes about the neoliberal, market-oriented, transition undergone in Sweden and is also confirmed by the statistics which show growing income gaps and class differences in Gothenburg (Jämlikhetsrapporten 2017).

Another discursive distance produced in the interviews is between “The politicians” and “Everyone else”. Three of the interviewees show signs of deep skepticism towards politicians in general, not related to any specific political party. Pia continuously repeats that “the politicians” do not know anything about “real life”. She also insinuates that since “most of them” live in richer areas, where they have access to everything that they might need, they are not suitable to make decisions concerning Kortedala. Three of the participants express doubt in the local politicians and in there being any genuine concern for the people in Kortedala. Bengt formulated himself as such: “It’s as if they’re sitting in a fake reality, some sort of bubble, no reaction.” Another interviewee, Sandra, claims that “people don’t think that the politicians want to invest out here. A lot of people are pretty resigned”.

There are similarities to what Velasquez (2007), in his study in Fittja, writes about political resignation that stems from feelings of being marginalized and excluded from society and how that can lead to an unwillingness to participate in official political structures. It could explain why the participants’ frustrations are so often directed at ‘politicians’ in general, rather than on specific politicians or political parties. Returning to the discussion under 5.1.2 and Freire’s (1970/2000) discussion on the creation of political subjects, this resignation and lack

of trust for official political structures could be a result of institutional and political objectification and lack of dialogue. The interviewees express a general feeling of not being listened to or taken seriously by the politicians within the representative democratic institutions. Bengt claims that most of the politicians in the district council do not actually live in the eastern parts of Gothenburg but that they have been centrally assigned the responsibility of Kortedala and adjoining areas, something which he calls a “democratic shortfall”.

Anna, the former library assistant, says the following:

I think you have to believe that you mean something, that you can make changes. Or else it's like 'Nah, there is no point, those politicians they will just decide anyway. They don't care'. If you thought that way, then you would just pack up and leave. So I think that everyone [in the group] has some kind of faith in people's movements, that they work and that change requires you to participate in democracy. In some way. Not just by voting but in between [elections] as well. – Anna (2019-02-04)

Two of the participants stress that a functioning democracy only exists when people are active in between elections. Sandra discusses direct democracy, as opposed to our current representative democracy, as a better, more inclusive and active, system. She states that people need to organize and engage in different issues and create a sense of community, and not just “wait for someone else to solve all of the problems”. Similar to what Ishkanian and Glasius (2018) found when they looked at square movements, the participants seem to have a conception of democracy which does not correspond well with the current democratic and political system.

## **5.3 Group Structures**

The third, and final, interview theme explores and analyzes how the group functions both in terms of internal practices as well as public practices. The theme contains the following three subthemes: Group Composition, Decision-making, and Meetings and Public Appearances.

### **5.3.1 Group Composition**

All of the interview participants describe the group's composition as shifting, meaning that

there is a variation in who comes to the meetings and the different activities and that it therefore is difficult to generalize and give a consistent image of what the group looks like. Despite this, the interviewees did express some ideas of what gender, age and "whiteness" structures are within the group. Anna says that both older and younger people are represented within the group. Pia argues that most activists are 50 years or older, but that there also are several younger people in the group. The teacher, Sandra, lovingly states that the activists generally consist of older "grumpy" people who have lived in Kortedala their whole lives and who are "strong characters" with "a lot of opinions".

There is some variation among the interviewees when it comes to their perception of gender representation in the group. Anna says that the group composition is "quite equal" when it comes to gender but that there might be a slight overbalance towards "the male" side. Pia similarly expresses that "there might be more men" in the group. In contrast to these statements, Bengt, the only male interviewee, at first says that the activists have consisted of "mostly girls", but then corrects himself and argues that the group is mixed when it comes to gender. Goebel (2011) and Kuumba (2002) describe how most members in grassroots movements, in South Africa as well as the US, are female and Verschuur (2009) states that urban women tend to organize in neighborhood movements. Velasquez (2011) has also described how women in barrios in Venezuela have organized at a grassroots level. It is not uncommon for those identified as women to be the driving force behind those types of movements, so it would not be surprising if similar structures were to be found in Save Kortedala Library.

It is difficult to draw any conclusions on the group's composition regarding gender solely based on the interviews, as there was no clear pattern in the interviewees' responses, but it is interesting to note how two of the women reported that there "might be" more men than women in the group and how the male interviewee's perception was at first, before correcting himself, that there were more women in the group. The women's responses could be a result of the group's speaking practices; the question of who takes up the most space does not necessarily need to be about numbers. Bengt kept referring to what he thought my objectives were ("if you apply a gender perspective...") throughout the interview, which might explain why he corrected himself. He seemed to be eager to say the "right" things.

Three of the interviewees express that there is not much variation when it comes to ethnic backgrounds. The group is quite “white” and there are not many activists with a Non-European background. Sandra explains:

I think it is for the same reason as why people who are not white are underrepresented in associations and the labor market and everywhere. There are probably many factors, but it could be a question of language, if you are new in Sweden, or that you’re not used to getting involved in different societal issues and that you don’t recognize... I think representation is necessary, that there are role models so that you dare to... So you see that you can [be active]. You might think ‘I want to be involved but there will only be white people there and what if... Am I welcome?’. That might be it. – Sandra (2019-03-02)

The fact that the group is predominantly ‘white’ can perhaps be related to the previously stated structures around age and that many of the activists are part of a white working-class that has lived in Kortedala their whole lives.

Two of the interview participants describe most of the people who are active in the group as part of the political left, but not necessarily members of a party. Sandra argues that protesting cuts in a suburb naturally is connected to also having left leaning opinions and values in general. This supports the idea that Save Kortedala Library is not an isolated interest group; it is or at least could become part of a global movement resisting neoliberalism, such as the ones described by Burean & Badescu (2014), Gonick (2016), Jezierska & Polanska (2018), Fisher et al. (2018); Ishkanian & Glasius (2018), Schierup et al. (2014), Sernhede (2014) and Ålund (2014). Save Kortedala Library needs to be understood in the context of these movements as well as the gentrification processes and increasing inequalities in Gothenburg described by Thörn and Thörn (2017).

### **5.3.2 Decision-making**

Just as in the case of the environmental activist group EDAG, as explained by Saunders (2018), Save Kortedala Library has no formal leaders and decisions in the group seem to be made at a consensus basis. All of the participants describe how decisions regarding what actions that should be taken next are made at general meetings, where everyone who wants to

join are welcome. Bengt claims that there are never any conflicts within the group, calling the decision processes "almost ultrademocratic", arguing that everything is thoroughly discussed and that this means the decision making goes on for a longer period of time. Everything is discussed until the subject is exhausted. Another one of the interviewees, Sandra, similarly states that "everything is discussed until we all agree". Furthermore she explains that decisions are made through simple majority, but that there hardly ever is any voting; there is often a consensus within the group. Tasks are distributed spontaneously. Sandra explains that people take on whatever tasks they want and that ideas always are welcome. Since they all agree on what they want to accomplish as a group, she explains, there is always room for new ideas, "if you want to do something, just go ahead!".

Sandra brings forward a discussion within the group that "wasn't a conflict, but it was difficult" and that was when group discussed whether they should stay party-politically unattached or not. The interviewee claims that a majority wanted it to stay that way. She says that there was a bit of tension, but that the decision eventually was accepted by those who were opposed to it.

### **5.3.3 Meetings and Public Appearances**

The participants all perceive the group's meetings as informal and not very structured. An agenda is formed at the beginning of the meeting, and according to two of the female participants that agenda is not strictly followed during the meeting. It is sometimes "difficult to have substance in the meetings" and there is a "lack of discipline". Pia says that the loose structure around the meetings is not necessarily negative, but that the informality might also be an advantage, making the meetings more "social" and "fun". Some people are said to take up a lot of time during the meetings, which "makes people tired" and has an impact on efficiency. The role of meeting leader and secretary varies and is decided on the spot. Meeting protocols are then posted on Facebook and sent out via email to the group. The meetings do not occur regularly, but only "when there is a need", i.e. around a specific activity. There is a subgroup that is called the 'board' (transl. from Swedish), supposed to take more initiative and responsibility than the rest of the group, but according to the participants initiatives come from all directions. The group is not an organization or member association on paper, but rather a network where the participants use association terms, such as "protocols" and

“board”. The structure is informal and there is no official membership; the group is based on an email-list and spontaneous actions.

Regarding speaking practices, both public speaking and speaking at meetings, the participants present a somewhat consistent image of who takes up the most space and is more 'visible' than the others. Anna states that there are a few men who are particularly visible and have a “tendency to talk a lot”. Another interviewee, Sandra, describes how the older men take up space and time resulting in inefficiency and people becoming “tired”.

Some men are used to... they love their own voice so much that they don't... they need to learn that, ok, is this important, do I have to say this? Does it help the meeting? I always try to think that, ok, what are we here to do? Some people like to talk and share and sometimes the meetings have become more like group therapy about everything that is wrong in society. And I can understand that need, but at the same time... I've always been like "Ok, what is the next step for the group?". A meeting should lead to activities that should lead to a goal – to save the library. A meeting is not for your own sake. – Sandra (2019-03-02)

Anna believes that it is a cultural issue, as well as a question of habit, that men generally speak more than women at the meetings and that “it’s definitely not because women are less interested, absolutely not”.

The practice of speaking publicly is also, based on the interviews, dominated by a few men. In all of the interviews mainly two men are mentioned by name and sometimes a woman and another man, as the people who are the unofficial spokespersons for the group. Pia’s perception is that it is mostly men who take on the part of speaking publicly. Sandra, the teacher, points out that the part of speaking publicly depends on who is willing to and has the time to participate in the different events, of which some are set on work-days during daytime, but that it also is silently implied who the spokespersons are. She argues that it might be difficult for someone with less political experience to dare to break this tacit structure and offer to speak instead of one of the usual spokespeople.

They’re active in political associations so they’re used to taking up space and talking.

Sometimes I think that it would have been better to be more like “who’s going to [speak]?”, but it also depends on who’s willing to do that. It can be difficult sometimes to be like “I know that you want to speak but I think someone else should do it this time”.

– Sandra (2019-03-02)

There also seems to be a number of practices reiterating gender norms in regards to taking responsibility for the meetings and the group as a whole; making sure that there is a progress or movement towards the goal of saving the library. Anna explains that it is mostly women who “take some responsibility” and make sure that the agenda is followed and that the meeting does not exceed the set out timeframe. One of the interviewees, Anna, explains that there is a “young girl” who usually brings her computer to the meetings and takes on the role of taking notes and Pia claims that one of the women, the same one mentioned in the topic of public speaking, is usually the person who is in charge of the meeting.

The image formed from the interviews is one where those identified as women perform different caring-practices conforming with ideas of hegemonic femininity and those coded as men perform masculinity through taking up space, straying from the agenda, or as I understood it, saying things to bring the attention onto them rather than the cause, but these practices are not left unchallenged. The female interviewees describe how the women in the group try to hold back the “talkative” men and remind them of the limited time, as well as themselves taking initiative as activists. They are definitely not portrayed as just caring “assistants” to the men in the group. Sandra says that it mainly is the older women in the group who “are good at containing the men”, and can say things such as “now it’s enough, you are done talking”.

With Connell (2009; 2005) and Butler (2007; 2011) as a theoretical starting point, I conclude that Save Kortedala Library does have a gender regime, with a number of gendered, or gendering, practices which reproduces it. The gendering practices that can be made out of the interviews are around speaking, both regarding who takes up the most space at the meetings and public speaking, as well as around caring and taking responsibility in and for the group.

Judging by the answers from the interviews it is generally those coded as women who make sure that the meetings move forward. It is difficult to make any certain claims about the group



due to the small number of interviews, but the pattern discovered in the interviews go in line with previous research by Velasquez (2011), Verchuur (2009), Kuumba (2002) and Goebel (2011) on grassroots activism which show women as the driving force in such movements. Goebel (2011) writes about South African protest movements where men hold leadership positions despite there being more female members than men. The interview data indicate a similar structure in Save Kortedala Library, in who is assigned the role of ‘spokesperson’ and who performs the actual work. Using Connell (2009; 2005) and Butler (2007; 2011), you could say that the different practices mentioned above reiterate gender norms around the ‘woman’ as caring and self-sacrificing, someone who does not take up more room than is necessary and through that performs emotional work for the wellbeing of the others in the group. There also seems to be a pattern of masculinity where those identified as men feel entitled to stray from the agenda; that their spontaneous thoughts are more important than the collectively decided upon agenda. The practices performed by the women in the group are practices that due to their less visible character might not receive as much recognition as e.g. giving a speech in public.

Important to stress is that the gendering practices are not formalized or outspoken in any way. There were no cases of obvious discrimination or sexist attitudes mentioned and it is necessary to take into account that this is a relatively small activist group – something that in itself affects group processes and structures and the room for change.

The following section presents the results from the observations where the group’s actual practices will be compared to what has been said in the interviews.

## **6. The Participants in Action**

In this part of the thesis I will present the results, as well as my own reflections, from three observations. The events that have been observed are the following: handing out flyers outside of Kortedala Library, a protest, and a group meeting. The observations allowed me to see the group’s gendering practices more clearly and helped me confirm some of the data obtained from the interviews.

## 6.1 Flyers 2019-01-26

The first observation was conducted for one hour in January 26<sup>th</sup> (2019). I had not had any prior contact with the group when I showed up. I wanted to ask them in person if they would want to participate in my study, and the people I spoke to at the event were optimistic about participating. One of the older men, whom I recognized as one of the ‘spokespersons’ of the group, explained that they have had many students approach them before, and I got the feeling that he was tired of participating in ‘school work’ or research. Despite telling me that, he remained optimistic towards my work and willing to participate, possibly due to my “insider”-status as a fellow Kortedala resident with my own situated knowledge about Kortedala, who also actively helped them handing out the flyers (see appendix 1) and talking to people walking by. He promised he would check with the others about me observing them at a group meeting.

There were eight activists present; three older white women, one middle-aged woman, one younger white woman, one older white man and two middle-aged white men. There were more women than men at the activity, which could be understood through the research by e.g. Goebel (2011), Velasquez (2011) and Kuumba (2002) which show that women tend to participate in grassroots activism in a higher degree than men. Consistent with the image presented in the interviews, the participants at the event did not display any ethnic variations; all of the activists appeared to be white Swedes.

Two of the older women initiated a conversation with me about the new apartment buildings around Kortedala square and how important it is to have a square that is “alive”. They also discussed how expensive those apartments are going to be. “It’s only the (political) left really, that fights for what’s left of the public good” one of the women argued. They also spoke about Donald Trump and how they hoped he would not be re-elected as president of the United States. Just as in the interviews the group observed at the flyer-handout event appeared to be politically left leaning.

The women also spoke about the importance of struggling for the neighborhood. One of the women had, due to her efforts, made sure that a park area in the neighborhood received more street lights.

After giving out the flyers, the group went inside the library to hand over cake and flowers, which had been bought to show appreciation to the librarians. Despite it being my first meeting with the group members I quickly felt part of the group. It was a welcoming and open atmosphere. This resonates with Fals-Borda (1987) and the concept of *vivencia*. My background, with my previous experiences, together with the feeling of familiarity and belonging that I received from actively participating helped my understanding of the cause.

## 6.2 Protest “Kommunupproret” 2019-01-31

The next observation was at a protest against cuts, in particular cuts that affect the suburbs negatively, outside of a city council meeting. Attending were different groups, mainly left/anarchist organizations but also interest groups such as a tenant’s group against “renovictions” (renovating apartments in working-class areas making them too expensive for the current tenants, i.e. the process of gentrification).



Picture taken at the protest. In the background there is a banner with the words “Listen to the people”.

The participation in the protest confirms the idea that Save Kortedala Library is not an isolated interest group solely focused on the library. Attending the protest, at which there

were several explicitly anti-capitalist groups, does not automatically mean that all the activists in Save Kortedala Library would define themselves as anti-capitalist or that they sympathize with each one of the other participating groups. It does however link the library group to other movements and causes, a connection that was evident in the interviews as well.

Save Kortedala Library had six activists present: Two older white women, one middle-aged white woman, two older white men and one middle aged white man. Five of them had also participated in the flyer handouts 2019-01-26. Once again, the group was 'white', but this time there was a gender balance, with equally as many men as women.

I approached one of the women I recognized from the flyer event. We spoke about the environment and the activist Greta Thunberg. After that I went to say hello to one of the 'spokespersons' with whom I also spoke at the previous observation. He told me that he will need to step down from his responsibilities in the group, including the speech he was supposed to give at the protest, for personal reasons. The task of speaking at the demonstration was given to another man in the group. This corresponds well with the gendered practices relating to visibility and representation that were mentioned in the interviews. The man who was originally assigned the task of speaking at the protest and his replacement were the same two men who were frequently mentioned in the interviews as the group's most public figures.

Representatives from different activist groups got up on stage to each say a few words about their struggle. Then came the representative from Save Kortedala Library:

I am going to start by giving you an idea of what has happened. When you go to the district council in Kortedala and ask the politicians "You who want to have a well-functioning library, raise your hand". Look around, see how many of the people who are here (at the protest) are for a well-functioning library, raise your hands. (Most people in the audience raises their hands). Exactly.

But if you ask the politicians, how many do you think raised their hands? Not a single one. It started with them wanting to throw the library out of Kortedala square. A spontaneous petition took form. A group was created, wonderful people. And this is about a year and

three months ago. During that time we have saved the library, we had a petition where we gathered 4500 names in a short period of time, that we threw at *them* at the meeting, which made them back down and keep the library in its current location.

But then they still cut down and halved the library. But we have been active and made them back down and now the library is open again on Saturdays. We in the group, Save Kortedala Library, have decided to save the library, we want it, we want to improve it. That means we will stay active and never stop contacting the politicians, and we will make sure that this library will once again be a functioning and complete library where the citizens of Kortedala can come and go, just like before. A wonderful library.

The organizer of the protest got up on stage and commented that Kortedala Library has been one of the best libraries in the city and called it “criminal” to cut it. ”It says a lot about the souls of the politicians”. Just as in the interviews there was a theme of skepticism or contempt towards *politicians*, being representatives of a disliked system.

A woman from another activist group in Kortedala went on stage and said: “Kortedala again, I don’t know what our deal is on that side of town, but we sure are grumpy”. She was angry and referred to one politician as “Marie Antoinette”. Her anger was invigorating.

One of the male ‘spokespersons’ called me later that evening (after the protest) to tell me that he had discussed my work with the others in the board and that I was welcome at their next meeting.

### **6.3 Group Meeting 2019-03-14**

The last observation was at a group meeting where the members of Save Kortedala Library were going to decide what to do next. There were eight participants, excluding myself, of which five were women and three men. Three of the participants were young (appeared to be 25-35 years), one middle-aged and the other four 60 years and older. Just like at the previous two observations the group was ‘white’. All but one had traditional Swedish names.

I was told, as an explanation for the low number of participants, that the board had accidentally set the meeting the same time and date as a Swedish Tenants' Union meeting. This means that

there is a parallel struggle, against gentrification and “renoviction”, that many members of Save Kortedala Library are also a part of. Two of the women had done the practical preparations for the meeting. One had brewed coffee and taken out cups and other things needed at the meeting and the other woman had baked and brought cake, which are caring practices such as the ones mentioned in the interview section. Most people were late. The meeting finally started at 6.55 pm, 25 minutes after the set-out time. One of the women had written a suggestion for an agenda and was also chosen to be chairwoman of the meeting. The woman who had prepared the coffee offered to take notes.

There was no ‘presentation round’, which I had previously been told there would be, so I had to interrupt in order to ask for consent to observe and record the meeting. My perception was that there was a lack of clear structures around the meeting, which conforms with the results from the interviews. After gaining consent I remained ‘invisible’ for the most part, with an interesting exception which happened 50 minutes into the meeting. I was taking notes and was not looking at the participants at the time. The situation went as follows:

(I am writing down what male participant 1, an older man, is saying)

Male participant 2 (another one of the older men): You can notice something if you’re going to look at that, that thing you’re doing... hello?

(The room went silent, so I looked up, realizing that the “you” was referring to me.)

Me: Oh!

MP2: You need to listen more carefully.

MP2 continues: They haven’t answered us in a year. We have been to a lot of meetings. There are a lot of films, you know.

Me: Where can I find those?

MP2: I will tell you later.

After this strange interaction one of the older women turned to me and told me that the films were taken at the district council meetings, almost as if she wanted to manage or soften the male participant's rudeness. Once again a woman performs caring or emotional work. After the meeting the man approached me to tell me that he wanted me to meet with him and his partner so that he could update me on everything that has happened. I got the feeling that he wanted to control the narrative. He said that I was doing a good thing and that he wanted to contribute, but his actions were contradictory, his words did not correspond well with the tone of his voice and his body language. I decided to not take up on his offer.

All attendees were active in the discussions, but two of the men (MP1 and MP2) dominated the space. The women, mainly the meeting chairwoman, had to contain the men and continuously steer back the discussions to the agreed upon agenda. This confirms what the female participants expressed in the interviews.

When I read through the transcription and began counting, I saw that the chairwoman was interrupted twice by one of the women and eight times by one of the men (MP1 and MP2). Other women in the group were also interrupted, although not as frequently. One example:

Female participant1: It's not a lot of money, but I think that it's more...

MP2 tries to interrupt, but is stopped by FP1.

FP1 (loudly): Am I allowed to finish?

Another interesting dynamic was that the two men mentioned above sometimes turned to each other, having their own discussions, instead of including everyone in the conversation. Using the theoretical framework presented by Butler (2007; 2011) and Connell (2005; 2009) the actions of these men could be understood as performative practices used to establish dominance, performing masculinity. The women of the group took responsibility for logistics, coffee and so on, writing a suggested agenda, leading the meeting, taking notes, taking on

tasks, such as creating a Facebook-event and making a public statement – as well as containing and managing masculinity structures within the group. The fact that the women were the ones who were ‘in charge’ of and took responsibility for the meeting goes in line with both previously mentioned research as well as the results from the interviews.

As a final comment I want to share that I have perceived the group as open and transparent throughout the whole process. When I have spoken to the participants, they have generally seemed to be happy about my presence and have wanted to talk to me. At the meeting, as well as the other events, there has been a sense of community and solidarity. One of the participants, MP1, gave me and another woman a ride home after the meeting and we had a pleasant conversation about our neighborhood. The day after he also emailed me a document with the 328 comments from the petition, which he had put together, in order to help me in my process.

## **7. Discussion**

This section begins with reflections on positionality and how it is connected to the research, after which I will present the conclusions drawn using the analysis from previous sections. Finally, I will summarize the work and present my finishing thoughts on this research project.

### **7.1 Reflections on Positionality**

How might my position as a white, working-class, young woman in academia have affected how the participants have viewed and embraced my presence? I have perceived the group as open with a low threshold. People have been willing to participate and have even been enthusiastic about my interest in them. I have been taken seriously by most of the participants. The only situation where I felt a bit uneasy was when the older man at the meeting wanted to “test” me and, from what I could tell, establish a hierarchy between us. It might have been because of my age, gender and my outsider status as an academic and not one of the activists. I would not say that this behavior was representative for the group. I have spoken to three other male group members and not noticed any such tendencies with them; they have seemed happy about my presence and work and been willing to share their perspectives.



My gendered position as a woman might actually have been helpful. When doing interviews about mental health and masculinity with working-class men for my bachelor's thesis I and my male partner were treated differently by the informants. My partner became more of an "insider" where it was assumed that he was "in on" many macho stereotypes. Interestingly enough it was not a disadvantage that I was a woman – it was rather the opposite. The informants were more detailed and 'neutral' in their answers and took the interviews more seriously. It could have negative implications, such as having answers that may be less 'honest' and being perceived as perhaps more of a therapist rather than a researcher, something that I experienced in doing the bachelor's thesis. The point is not to claim that one is better than the other but rather to stress that the gendered positions of the researcher and the informants affect what results come from the data collection. Without condoning such stereotyping, I think my gendered position might have made me appear safe and unthreatening, possibly increasing the willingness of the participants to speak to me.

Another reason the group has been so welcoming and transparent might be the fact that it is a relatively small group which needs all the help it can get to raise awareness about their cause. There was, from start, a real possibility of mutual exchange, an idea that my presence could give something back to the group instead of them merely being an "information bank" for me to take from.

Just like in Edmonds-Cady's (2011) case, a big part of why I chose this topic for the thesis can be explained by my own experiences of poverty, of public libraries and what they have meant for me growing up. It is difficult to say how those experiences have affected the results. It is not something that I have shared with any of the participants, not because I wanted to keep it secret but simply because no one has asked about it. My background has not affected how the group has treated me, but it might have had an effect on my emotional responses in conducting the research. If I didn't have my particular class background it could have been easy for me to dismiss the group on the basis of its gendering practices and perhaps not fully grasp why the group is so important. I acknowledge that this is probably too big of a conclusion to make, but my class background, translated into a kind of situated knowledge in Haraway's (1988) words, *might* have made it easier for me to capture the complexity of the issue and hold the course throughout the process.

All in all, I have perceived the group as safe and welcoming. I have easily gained access to the group and have not had any difficulties in finding participants. Being a resident in Kortedala myself could have contributed to that too. When approaching people I have always introduced myself as a “fellow Kortedala resident”. Living in Kortedala has made me more accessible; all of the interviews as well as two of the observations have been performed in Kortedala, so it has been relatively easy for group members to participate.

## **7.2 Conclusions**

The aim of the study was to discuss conditions for urban activism through looking at the interest group Save Kortedala Library, with a focus on the group’s gendering practices and how those practices can be challenged. The aim was furthermore to examine the role Kortedala Library plays for the community as well as to relate the cause of Save Kortedala Library to a larger context of resistance to a neoliberal policy of cuts.

The research questions have been:

1. How can the meaning that Kortedala Library has for the community be understood in relation to neoliberalism and the construction of gender?
2. How does Save Kortedala Library’s practices relate to the general neoliberal development in Gothenburg and can the group be understood as part of a bigger resistance to such a development?
3. What are the group’s gendering practices that hinder the development and sustainment of the group and how could such practices be challenged?

Using the analysis from the previous sections I draw the following conclusions:

The image that took form in the interviews was that the library has a multitude of functions for the community. The Library at Kortedala offers help with homework, both to children and adult students, help that for some people is not available elsewhere, as well as space for those who live too crowdedly at home to be able to do their homework there. There are computers and printers, which not everybody can afford to have at home, available at the library. Public libraries are free of charge, open to everyone and may help building a sense of community.

In the interviews there are examples of how the library is used by different generations and how many use it for social reasons. Meeting with other visitors as well as librarians might be, as one interviewee expressed, “someone’s only human contact that day”, referring to elderly visitors. We live in an increasingly digitalized society, but not every household has a computer or even the knowledge to use one. Both the results from the interviews and the observations as well as previous research show that public libraries benefit communities. With that as a basis, to begin answering research question number one, I draw the conclusion that the library in Kortedala is important for the community and that Save Kortedala Library thus is a group with a well-motivated purpose. To understand why the budget cuts were made, despite the library’s importance for the community, I argue that it has to be related to neoliberalism and gendering processes.

Most librarians are ‘women’, most book borrowers are ‘women’. The library in Kortedala had, before the cuts, children’s activities and since we know those who are categorized as women generally are the ones who are responsible for the household and for the children that too is a question of gender. Drawing from this I conclude that the library as a place is feminized through the practices mentioned above and that the budget cuts therefore can be understood as part of the reproduction of patriarchal dominance as well as of neoliberalism.

Moreover, I argue that the library in Kortedala is rendered irrelevant or useless not only because of its feminized character but also because it does not follow the neoliberal logic where market interests, individualism and economic growth are prioritized. The public library does not produce profit, its visitors are not consumers. It is a space that does not require that you pay to be allowed there. It is also an issue of a systematic down-prioritizing of working-class suburbs. Instead of investing in them, you cut well-functioning institutions and, as Ålund (2014) writes, subject the citizens in those suburbs to negative interventions such as increased securitization instead.

The group has similarities to bigger movements, not just in a Swedish context but to movements resisting neoliberal policies in countries such as South Africa, Romania and the US. They are similar in the way in which society and its economic system is criticized. The activists with whom I have spoken all refer to a bigger context when discussing the cause of

saving “their” public library. The motivations behind protesting the library cuts are both of a personal and a political kind and the participants all relate their struggle to the general neoliberal development in Gothenburg. To answer research question number two, I draw the conclusion that the group is indeed part of an anti-neoliberalist resistance and not merely an interest group limited to the question of the library. The interviews and observations show that the group has the potential to be boundary-crossing; that involvement in the group is often connected to an interest in other political issues as well.

Regarding the group’s gendering practices, and research question number three, I have asked myself whether I can really draw any conclusions about gender with such a small sample of participants. The highest number of activists at an observation has been eight. I am careful with making definite assumptions or conclusions, because the smaller the group the more does individual characteristics and personalities matter. It makes drawing conclusions on gender structures more delicate; who gets to speak publicly might sometimes be less about gender and more about who happens to be available at each specific event. Nevertheless, I feel confident in drawing *some* conclusions. The mix of methods, having both interviews and observations, helped my understanding of the group’s performances of gender and allowed me to see some ways in which gender norms are reproduced.

The group has a gendered structure, a “gender regime” to use Connells (2009) words, where gender norms are both constructed and reiterated through a number of practices. These gendering practices are informal since the group structure is loose and does not, from what I have noticed, have any clear-cut rules around “membership”. It is not a formal organization or association, but a grassroot grouping organized around the issue of the library. The gendering practices consist of questions of visibility, recognition and caring/responsibility.

The interviews and the observations both show that it is mostly those categorized as men who speak publicly as well as take up space at the group's internal meetings. Meanwhile, it seems to be those categorized as women who take the most responsibility and perform the practices needed in order to make progress in the struggle. Both in the interviews and the observations I have noticed a pattern where those coded as women take responsibility for calling to meetings, making sure there is an agenda and that the agenda is followed, taking notes and

sharing them with the others, practices which can be said to reiterate the norm of the woman as “carer”. It is also a pattern of those coded as men straying from the agenda, taking up an unproportionate amount of space at the meetings, and the ‘women’ trying to provide structure and “contain the men” as someone formulated it. ‘Women’ in the group are forced to put energy into managing the ‘men’ and their expressions of masculinity. My conclusion is that this internal struggle might create inefficiency, but within this struggle also lies the potential for change. The normative practices could be interpreted as challenged by the practice of “containing the men” and continuously bringing the conversation back to the agenda and not accepting the disruptions. These efforts to create structure, interrupting the ‘men’ when needed, could be said to actually challenge hegemonic notions of femininity and the woman as nothing more than a caring “assistant” to men.

One suggestion for counteracting the normative gender dynamics is to formalize certain parts of the group's work, for example by having regular meetings and rotation schemes for chairmanship, note taking and other roles at the meetings. Another suggestion is to work internally with encouraging more people to take on a more public role and speak at different events.

There is an obvious obstacle to making these types of changes: There are few active group members at this moment. The group has now existed for over a year, which is a long time for a “single issue group”. Many movements break apart after some time, like the square movements studied by Ishaknian and Glasius (2018), which became fragmented due to lack of common goals and strategies. Making the purpose and the structure of the group, stressing its importance for Kortedala, clear for outsiders could potentially attract more members. Just as one of the interviewees said having a variation in who gets to speak publicly and represent the group might draw more people to the group.

### **7.3 Final Words**

The library in Kortedala clearly has a lot of meaning to the community. We have a development, in Gothenburg as well as in Sweden, of increasing cuts of the welfare system and publicly owned institutions, such as libraries, mainly in working-class areas; it is becoming easier to be rich and harder to be poor. As I have stated earlier in the thesis the class

divide as well as the distance between people in the city is growing. Places such as the public library are needed, as meeting places, as a public service, as information centers. The problem is, of course, bigger than the cuts of the library – there should not be a class divide or any poverty at all. “It’s sick” as one of the interviewees commented on the topic of budget cuts. The system is sick. But in the current economic and political system, the libraries could play a role in giving the working-class better life chances and provide the opportunity for everyone to be able to access books, access culture, find information, use a computer, and get a sense of security and community.

Save Kortedala Library started out as a grassroots initiative with the purpose of fighting for their community. The activists or group members have all my respect for that. The group has managed to create a sense of community and solidarity as well as an interest for the residential area and its inhabitants which in my opinion is worthy of preserving. What I wanted to show was that this activism also has a gendered character; that gendering practices are not something “added”, a perspective that can be separated from everything else, but rather are part of the very core of the activism. They are present in the mechanisms that take the movement forward as well as the mechanisms that hinder development and sustainability. There are gendering practices performed within Save Kortedala Library reproducing gender norms that go in line with society’s gender order, the patriarchy. My conviction is that illuminating and challenging these practices gives us better conditions to take to action.

Something which I have not been able to discuss thoroughly but that would be interesting for further study is the long-term consequences of shutting or cutting down libraries in suburbs for general education, school results, criminality as well as the working class’ ability to organize resistance. I think that this is a perspective that needs to be raised more and that is perhaps lost in the discussions due to the library’s gender coded character. Public libraries are not outdated and irrelevant, as some debaters would want to make it seem. As I have hopefully shown, the libraries have essential societal functions that cannot be overstated. I would like to end the thesis by repeating the words of one of the interviewees:

“If people wouldn’t protest, they would have cut down everything by now, we wouldn’t have any welfare left.”

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## Appendix 1

# Inga fler nedskärningar i Göteborg!

**KOMMUNUPPRORET** kallar grupper och enskilda till gemensamma protester mot ständiga nedskärningar och försämringar av verksamhet som är viktig och nödvändig för kommunens medborgare.

Redan har aktiva som protesterar mot chockhöjda hyror, nedläggning av verksamhet för pensionärer och fritidsverksamhet för ungdomar, stress och neddragning inom hemtjänsten, hoten mot kultur, folkbildning och idrott i förorter anslutit sig och ska delta i protesterna. Vi uppmanar fler föreningar, aktivister och alla arga göteborgare att göra likadant.

**Våra skattepengar ska gå till verksamhet, inte till byråkrati.** Inte heller till höga politiker- och chefslöner, meningslösa prestigeprojekt eller ROT och RUT-avdrag för höginkomsttagare.

**Vi vill stoppa privatiseringar och istället öka det gemensamma ägandet.** Pengar som är avsedda för sociala satsningar ska inte bli till vinst i privata företag.

**Kommunen ska vara den bästa arbetsgivaren.** De anställda ska ha bra lön, bra villkor och anställningstrygghet. Det ska finnas tid, arbetsro och bemanning för att göra ett bra jobb och respekt för insatsen. Istället för att skära ner på väl fungerande verksamhet gäller att lära av misstag och bygga vidare och utveckla det som är bra. Behoven måste styra över budget.

**Staten ska inte vältra över uppgifter och åtaganden på kommunerna utan att det är finansierat.**

## PROTESTMÖTE

torsdag 31 januari kl 16.30

utanför Kronhuset (där kommunfullmäktige sammanträder)

Följ **KOMMUNUPPRORET** på Facebook

Sprid **KOMMUNUPPRORET** på arbetsplatser, mötesplatser och sociala medier

Ta kontakt med oss: [goteborg@kommunupproret.se](mailto:goteborg@kommunupproret.se)

The flyer from the participatory observation 2019-01-26.