James G. Rice

“We only help women with children here”: Male clients at an Icelandic material aid charity

Abstract

This paper explores the under-researched positions of men as clients within a material aid charity system predominantly geared towards assisting women and children. The research on which this paper is derived, is from a multi-year ethnographic research project that focused on the practices of material aid charities in contemporary wealthy societies. The project was largely conducted at the Icelandic charity Mæðrastyrksnefnd (Mothers’ Support Committee) in Reykjavik, the capital city of Iceland. This particular organisation formed in 1928 to support widows, single mothers and their children at a time when the state sponsored social welfare system was practically non-existent. The founding ideology of this organisation parallels the long-standing charitable practices of evaluating their clientele based upon subjective interpretations of ‘worthiness’ and notions of dependence and vulnerability, and which also arguably mirrors the core ideologies of many social welfare states. Despite some common claims by the staff to the contrary, Mæðrastyrksnefnd did indeed assist men, but certain ‘kinds’ of men who were perceived by the staff to embody a form of masculinity which deviated from the normative but shared certain aspects of positionality as their ideal clientele. From the micro perspective of one specific organisation, the gendered practices of evaluation and classification has implications for understanding how gender, and forms of masculinity in specific, are produced, reproduced and contested in the context of forms of bureaucratic governance and the politics of social welfare.

Key Words:
Charity, Iceland, masculinity, gender, subjectivity, bureaucracy, governance
“We only help women with children here”:

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From early 2004 through to 2006, and sporadically afterwards, I worked as a volunteer and researcher at the Icelandic charity Mæðrastyrksnefnd (Mothers’ Support Committee) in the capital city of Reykjavík while conducting research for my PhD dissertation in anthropology (Rice 2007). The name of this organisation – Mæðrastyrksnefnd, or Mothers’ Support Committee – suggested to me that gender would be a central theme of my research, though I was not sure in what ways. Masculinity, particularly in the context of a charity that catered to single mothers and their children, was certainly quite distant from my research interests at the time. However, it shortly became clear to me that the issue of ‘men,’ or at least particular kinds of ‘men,’ loomed large over the practices of this specific organisation, charity in general and even the social welfare programmes of the state. My broad interest in the practices of material aid charities in contemporary wealthy societies soon focused on the ways in which charities classified and evaluated their clients during their eligibility proceedings and how, in turn, such efforts ‘produced’ their clients as subjects through practice and discourse. The categories of single mothers, disability pensioners and senior citizens figured prominently in the discourses of charity when they publicized their work and solicited for donations, even if such descriptors did not correspond well to the demographics of their clientele. In my interpretation, the staff knew well what ‘kinds’ of clients would resonate positively among the public and why. Yet it was also very apparent what ‘categories’ of people were overlooked in these discourses and in practice were discouraged from seeking assistance. On a super-ordinate level of classification, this organisation – mirroring the long-standing practices of charity (Lindberg 1993) – divided their clients between those who were perceived as ‘vulnerable’ and thus worthy of assistance and those who were not, who were in turn rendered as marginalized and excluded. There are parallels to be found within the formal social welfare system as well, with charities playing a supporting or ancillary role. From the micro perspective of one specific organization, the practices of sorting the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd depended upon a complex array of factors which has implications for understanding how gender, and
forms of masculinity in specific, are produced, reproduced and contested in spaces of governance that do not often draw much scholarly attention.

My original research plan envisioned a one year period of ethnographic research that focused heavily on participant-observation and qualitative interviews. Theoretically, I was inspired by Michel Foucault’s ideas of ‘bio-power’ (Foucault 1980a) – the vast apparatus of knowledge producing bodies and the work of professionals designed to regulate and manage the health and welfare of the citizens of modern states. I had come to see the work of the volunteers and staff of charities as representative of who Foucault referred to as “agents of liaison” (Foucault 1980b, 62): not quite agents of the state as formally understood but nevertheless philanthropic individuals and groups dedicated to addressing social problems and working in parallel or directly engaged with the aims of the formal state social welfare agencies, as did Mæðrastyrksnefnd through accepting referrals from the municipal social services, sharing information and producing knowledge. As such, this approach to analysing contemporary material aid charities could be situated within the work of others influenced by Foucault’s ideas of power and governance who have considered the role of non-governmental organisations in producing self-regulating citizens (Cruickshank 1999) and have challenged the simplistic notions of governance by arguing that governmental technologies are not the sole purview of ‘the State,’ as formally understood, but very much involve the knowledge and expertise of those who ‘govern at a distance’ (Rose and Miller 1992).

What was intended as a one year ethnographic project gradually became a multi-year project while I continually negotiated and re-negotiated my role within Mæðrastyrksnefnd as a researcher, a volunteer and, during a time of personal financial difficulty, somewhat of a client. My offer to volunteer my labour in exchange for permission to conduct research was mutually beneficial. I paid careful attention to how charities operated in practice by taking part in day-to-day operations as a volunteer/researcher and getting to know the staff as well as many of the clients. My positionality as young(ish), male and ‘foreign’ (indicated by my visual appearance and accent) marked me as distinct from the middle-aged and elderly all-female Icelandic staff. This became useful for research purposes, as the inevitable discussions about where I was from and what I was doing at Mæðrastyrksnefnd lent itself well to an explanation of my status and research interests and which resulted in the development of many productive research relationships. My on-site field jottings were expanded into daily fieldnotes which were later complemented with interview and archival material. From the very first day of my observations of practice at Mæðrastyrksnefnd I knew that I would devote a good deal of effort to exploring the ways in which this organisation evaluated their clients as eligible for assistance. Mæðrastyrksnefnd employed a complex and often contradictory and tension-filled system with which they ‘filtered’ their clients as eligible for assistance. The eligibility requirements were derived from the staff’s understandings of the historical practices of their
organisation with an ambiguous reading of their formal mission statement. But these re-
quirements were also interpreted through each individual staff member’s views and posi-
tionality as well as broader cultural understandings in regard to a complex range of fac-
tors. This included, but was not limited to, the factors of gender, class, understandings of
poverty, issues of disability and immigration, and right down to the micro interpersonal
interactions between specific staff members and clients.

At the beginning of this process, it would be fair to say that I was bewildered by the
evaluation process. Partly I did not understand why such probing personal questions
were posed by the staff to the clients and why the filling out of detailed application forms
on a routine basis was warranted, especially so when the clients only received a bag or
two of weekly food assistance and access to donated clothing and other household goods.
I was also perplexed by the apparently ambiguous and varied outcomes of the evaluation
process. While the majority of such staff-client interviews were generally uneventful, the
normal rhythm of the distribution day was also punctuated by interviews that were filled
with tension, conflict and sometimes hostility. During my observations of practice, I paid
attention to the clients who were assisted without incident as well as those who arose sus-
picion on the part of the staff in order to construct a model of who were the ‘ideal’ clients
and who were not. It was quickly obvious that the presence of men as clients at a charity
that was founded on the basis of assisting women and their children was a controversial
issue for some staff members. Yet it was also obvious that some men were assisted not
only without question but also given preferential treatment.

My further observations led me to conclude that these male clients were complexly
‘read’ by the staff that involved a wide range of factors beyond that of biological sex. The
shifting contextual emphasis on particular perceived traits of an individual client on the
part of the staff recalled for me work in the tradition of intersectionality. This work had
originally focused on the marginalisation of women but also in regard to the interplay of
other factors such as class and race with gender (e.g. Crenshaw 1991), as well as sociologi-
cal work that focused on the situational complexity of positionality (e.g. Mouffe 2000).
As such, it would be inaccurate to say that male clients were evaluated in terms of their
sex but rather ‘masculinity’ or ‘masculinities’ as a collection of attributes whereby certain
forms were deemed acceptable within the predominantly feminine space of Mæðra-
styrksnefnd. The dominant hegemonic form of masculinity – or perhaps ‘forms’ conside-
ring that an overview of the literature challenges the notion of an ahistorical, unitary
masculinity (see Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) – is produced and reproduced and
contested in many spaces, even those that are not at all associated with masculinity.
Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994) argue that the “shifting and contingent relation be-
tween ‘masculinity’ and ‘men’ and power becomes clear when we examine the enactment
of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities in a single setting” (ibid., 10). I would sug-

produced and challenged throughout daily life in far more mundane settings than some of the anthropological literature suggests. It is also critical to focus the analytical lens on settings where masculinity is either not immediately apparent or else assumed at first glance not to be an issue, as these are significant spaces where hegemonic models are often produced and reproduced.

The issue of masculinity has implications not only for charity but the social welfare system in general. This can be noted with the factor of the dominant masculine ‘breadwinner’ ideology that is held to influence a wide array of programmes and services in Iceland, ranging from the provision of social welfare benefits (Njáls 2003, 2006) to the implementation of gender equality legislation (Einarsdóttir and Pétursdóttir 2009) to childcare arrangements in the context of the labour market (Pétursdóttir 2008, 2009). It has also been argued that males who do not conform to this normative ‘breadwinner’ role are marginalized and excluded from social services. In their classic analysis of the regulatory functions of welfare in the US, Piven and Cloward (1993) note that prospective clients of welfare programmes, particularly unemployed, childless men, were actively discouraged from applying for assistance (ibid., 154). Further, some observers of homeless shelters in the United States (e.g. Passaro 1996; Susser 2005) have noted that both transitional housing and shelter spaces are overwhelmingly set aside for women with children to the detriment of childless men. Similarly, the additional resources available for homeless women, as well as other strategies with which to secure housing, have been noted as contributing factors which render the issue of homelessness in Reykjavík, Iceland, as a predominantly male phenomenon (Björnsdóttir 2004). It has also been suggested that homeless men are both “hypermasculinized and emasculated” (Passaro 1996, 1). Homeless men “appear to be independent of the control of women, family, and society, and thus they are considered dangerous, violent, and aggressive” (ibid.). Yet they are also argued to be emasculated because they lack standing in the larger society as independent, breadwinning normative men and are thus disciplined and/or excluded for their perceived failures.

However, I have doubts regarding masculine categories as ‘breadwinner’ or binary models such as hyper-masculine/emasculated in general and particularly so in the context of my research. For example, if homeless men were perceived as ‘emasculated’ they would surely be welcomed for assistance as were single parents, seniors, disability pensioners and other ‘vulnerable’ people – but they clearly were not. But I would also not argue that the single fathers, elderly or disabled men who were welcomed for assistance are necessarily ‘emasculated’ in the process either, as has often been suggested to me on occasions when I presented my work in lectures or classrooms. The term ‘emasculated’ suggests something lost or removed, whereas in the classificatory processes of charities like Mæðrastyrksnefnd it appears to be the ‘addition’ of a factor(s) upon that of biological sex that increases the chances that a man is eligible for assistance (children, advanced age,
disability) or others that decrease his chance (homelessness, substance abuse, lack of children, working age). In turn, these factors interact in complex ways with the history of this specific organization as well as the positionalities of individual staff members. Post-structural theorists have challenged the simplistic, binary notions of sex (e.g. Butler 2006[1990]) as have others in regard to the binary notion of impairment–disability (e.g. Tremain 2005), and I do not mean to imply that I uncritically accept the notion of such models. But in the context of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, concepts such as ‘men’ and ‘women’ appeared to be treated as foundational categories upon which other factors are added and which come into prominence or recede into insignificance depending upon the context. In the case of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, ‘women’ were accepted as the de facto clientele unless some specific factor or behaviour detracted from their eligibility – which was very rare – whereas ‘men’ were excluded in principal unless they demonstrated a form of masculinity that was comprised of factors that were in sum seen as favourable by the staff and thus rendered as eligible for assistance. Yet masculinity/femininity also appeared to operate as a field or set of traits or behaviours in which biological sex was only one factor among others and sometimes not given much centrality or prominence. Charities such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd provide fertile ground in which to think about how governmental technologies – in the broader Foucauldian sense – help to produce the gendered subjects of contemporary social welfare states. I will now turn to a brief history of Mæðrastyrksnefnd before exploring how these processes unfolded in practice.

‘After all, this is Mæðrastyrksnefnd’

None of the staff members disagreed with my assessment that Mæðrastyrksnefnd generally favoured assisting women, but there were a range of opinions on the matter to be found beyond the commonly invoked ‘after all, this is Mæðrastyrksnefnd,’ which was offered as a self-explanatory statement for these gendered practices but which never seemed to be entirely believed by the majority of the staff. This is especially so considering that during the time of my research men comprised nearly 20% of their clients, and the staff were in a continual process of evaluating and re-evaluating their stance as per the presence of male clients in the recognition that the historical mandate of their organization was at odds with the realities of need they encountered in their work.

Unlike the case of many other European nations, charity in Iceland does not have deep historical roots and material aid charities only emerged at the close of the 19th century. When Mæðrastyrksnefnd formed in 1928, the Icelandic welfare system was in its formative state. The founding story of this particular organisation focuses on the sinking of the fishing trawler Jón Forseti out of Reykjavik in February of 1928 and the formation of Mæðrastyrksnefnd as a following response to assist the widows and the children of the seamen who perished in this accident. However, to link the founding of this charity to a
particular incident overlooks the fact that the first chair of this organisation, Laufey Valdimarsdóttir – the daughter of the key figure of the early Icelandic women’s movement – had vowed in her inaugural speech to investigate the situation of widows and single mothers in Iceland when she took the helm of her mother’s former organisation, the Women’s Rights Association of Iceland, in 1927 (Gestsson and Hjartarson 2004, 5). This stems from Laufey’s longstanding concern about the situation of poor women in Iceland in general rather than this specific accident at sea.

Mæðrastyrksněfnd was, for its time, a rather radical organisation that sought to enhance the political, legal, economic and social rights of women and children through political agitation and direct involvement in policy making. Material aid to their clients in the form of money, food and clothes played an ancillary role in their work, with the emphasis in terms of direct aid placed on providing legal assistance to poor women so they could fight for support for their children from absentee fathers or long-term state assistance. This kind of approach is not in keeping with the more dominant conservative models of charity which tended to emphasize the reform of individuals rather than the larger social order. But what Mæðrastyrksněfnd did share with other organisations in Iceland and abroad was that they were organised and managed by women of means and influence. The general association between women and 19th century philanthropy, particularly elite and middle-class women, has been much commented upon. One central thesis holds that philanthropy was an important means for women to have an influence on politics and social affairs through their charitable work at a time when their formal political rights were circumscribed. This holds for Iceland (Hákonardóttir 2000), as it does for the other Nordic nations (see Markkola 2000), other European states such as France (Adams 2005), and to some other parts of the world such as Australia (Swain 2007) and the United States (McCarthy 2003). But they also share a concern for ‘vulnerable’ members of the populace – usually perceived to be single women, children, disabled people, seniors and those dealing with serious illnesses.

While these 19th century philanthropists cast themselves as the ‘natural guardians’ of the poor in order to legitimate their work (Prochaska 1980), simultaneously they also naturalised their clientele as vulnerable and dependent. Mæðrastyrksněfnd continued to focus exclusively on women and children since its founding and did so for decades thereafter. It was confirmed for me by retired staff members that it was not until the 1970s that men in dire situations were unofficially assisted (with clothes, never money or food) and it was not until a decade after that single men with children started to be more regularly assisted. A key reason for this was that ongoing shifts in the larger Icelandic society in terms of urbanization, labour organization and forms of the family necessitated that the staff had to re-evaluate their work. However traditions and established organizational practice, once entrenched, appear to be difficult to dislodge and the gender-focused history of this organization continued to influence their work, even if debated and conte-
I will now turn to the inter-related themes of labour, the family, age and disability in order to demonstrate the interplay of these factors in the treatment of the male client at Mæðrastyrksnefnd.

Vulnerable women and marginalized men

The central role of work in Iceland has been much commented upon, as seen in the role of work in the identity and self-worth of Icelandic labourers at the turn of the last century (Magnússon 1989) up to the recent years of the dominance of white collar workers and high finance. Of course, this is still often perceived to be a specifically male working and breadwinning identity, even though Icelandic women work on average 36 hours a week and about 80% of Icelandic women are involved in the labour market, which is one of the highest rates among OECD nations (Pétursdóttir 2009, 9).

Based upon my observations of practice, interviews with the staff and analysis of discourse, ‘unemployment’ was generally seen as an acceptable reason for requesting assistance. However, the issue of work – or rather who should be working and not coming to a charity for help – was more of a central concern of the staff pertaining to males of working age and without visible disabilities. Working-aged females, even single women without children, were simply not subjected to the same level of suspicion and admonitions as similarly situated males. Women were not entirely absolved of the expectation of being engaged in paid employment, and there was a fair amount of grumbling behind the scenes about specific female clients who appeared youthful and fit for work, yet this was seldom commented directly to the clients nor did it play much of a role in whether or not they received assistance. In contrast, the requirement to work was more strictly applied to males, in the process helping to sustain the long-standing male-as-breadwinner ideology that held sway in the larger society, despite the obvious role of women in the labour force.

The majority of men were also not perceived as either having or being responsible for children and most claims to the contrary were treated with doubt and suspicion. This extended as well to younger and not just middle-aged males, reinforcing women as the normative, dependent clients of social services and child care providers. The following extract is from my notes where a staff member described a recent experience:

Last week there was a young man. He was unemployed, he lost his job and had no work and was caring for his seven year-old daughter. He called and asked if it was ok if he could come to Mæðrastyrksnefnd for help. I said of course. But when he came it wasn’t me who he spoke to in the front. When she checked the computer in Þjóðskrá [National Registry] it didn’t say anything about his daughter. Well, he stood up and got very angry and said that they weren’t treating him well. I called
him at home and his daughter answered the phone. I apologized and told him that if he came back we would help him. Well, I made up some bags and set them aside. The software only updates the fifth of every month and that is not good enough.

It was apparent that this staff member’s key concern was that the investigative tool the staff used to confirm the clients’ situations was not adequate; but the larger issue of excluding single, childless males or the suspicions that swirled around these clients in general was left unexamined.

However, some of the staff members during the time of my research made references to single fathers and were aware that the older or popular model of ‘the family’ was no longer in keeping with current Icelandic realities, if it ever was. The interviews of males were routinely characterized by their explanations to the staff that help was needed only on a specific week due to variable child care arrangements. As such there was a growing recognition among the staff that the notion of ‘single parent,’ let alone the traditionally favoured category of ‘single mother,’ was problematic. Over the last decade in Iceland the custody of children after the dissolution of a union has rarely been awarded to males and sole custody fathers have not accounted for more than 10% of custodial arrangements. However, joint custody arrangements in Iceland after the dissolution of a union have soared from 20% to slightly over 60% over the last decade (Hagstofa Íslands 2004) which makes the question of the category of ‘single parents’ more complex than it has generally been perceived to be. This problematic focus on ‘single mothers’ was placed into tension with the staff’s interpretations of the historical mandate of their organization with the actual demographics of their clientele. One staff member in particular was often given to uttering the phrase, “well, this is Mæðrastyrksnejnd” in discussions about men, overlooking how childless women who were not mothers also represented a significant portion of their clients. During a later interview I pressed her on this point, asking why childless men received much more scrutiny and admonitions to seek help elsewhere than childless women, even if their material needs for assistance were the same. She pondered this question for a moment and replied: “You know, that is a good question. I never really thought about it.” Towards the end of my field research I was surprised one day in the kitchen when she raised this issue on her own. I surmised that she had been mulling over this issue for some time or that some recent events had caught her attention as she declared to me: “Some of these men are in difficult situations. What about the ones who are paying alimony? They really have nowhere to go. The Church [Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar] only helps three times a year and that is nothing.” The nature of hegemonic understandings, held together in tension but subject to change, was reflected in the launch of Mæðrastyrksnejnd’s website in 2006 which acknowledged these inconsistencies: “The committee’s work has changed during the years. There is a constant increase in the numbers of those who seek the committee’s help. It is no longer just single
mothers but also men, both single and men who have children to support” (Mæðrastyrsnefnd 2006).

Whereas the staff recognized, to varying degrees, the inconsistencies with regard to their treatment of male clients pertaining to employment and child care, there was no apparent inconsistency in regard to helping disabled and elderly men in an organisation dedicated to helping ‘women in need.’ My initial confusion upon hearing some males being told that Mæðrastyrksnefnd is only for women with children while seeing other men regularly assisted started to lack contradictions once I began to appreciate how the staff conceived of their work and shifted my focus away from that of biological sex alone. For example, one male client, Eyþór (pseudonym), received regular assistance from Mæðrastyrsnefnd. He was older, disabled and married and was not providing for any children yet he received regular as well as preferential treatment from the staff. He had difficulty walking and received permission to park by the building and enter through the exit in order to bypass the usual routine and lessen the amount of time he would have to wait and stand. Eventually Eyþór would phone ahead and arrange to have his bags waiting by the door. All he would have to do from this point on was call ahead, honk his horn and I would bring his bags out to his car. Not only was he able to bypass the usual distribution procedures but he was able to bypass the entire inspection procedure as well, as did some women who had similar arrangements. As an older and married man he was as far as one could get from the ‘ideal’ category of a single mother with young children, yet there seemed to be no suspicion whatsoever about this client nor any effort to disqualify him from receiving regular assistance. Another example was Tómas (pseudonym), an elderly man who appeared physically fit but had endeared himself to the staff with his gruff but humorous persona. He also had a similar arrangement which allowed him to bypass the usual procedures. One staff member claimed that she did not know when and how this special treatment for this client started but just continued the established practice. Another pointed out that Tómas had been coming so long that he was almost a part of the organization. While not all elderly or disabled men had such special arrangements, generally speaking for males of or near retirement age, males with visible or significant physical disabilities, and those with apparent intellectual disabilities, the staff encounters with these clients were almost entirely devoid of the tensions and suspicions described earlier.

The differential treatment and perception of disabled males as non-threatening, asexual or as representing some kind of third gender has often been commented upon in work on issues of disability and masculinity (Gibson et al. 2007; Shuttleworth 2000; Shakespeare 1999) and is certainly not limited to the case of Iceland or charities in specific. In the case of Eyþór described above, as an older and also disabled man he did appear to be seen by the staff as non-threatening and as vulnerable and dependent and thus an ideal client of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, as were other similarly situated men. But other men who
were perceived as homeless or marginally housed, to be denizens of the street so to speak and associated with unpredictable behaviour, mental illness or substance abuse – and in particular those who did not perform the role of the subservient or docile client – were generally not welcome by many of the staff members and their presence did elicit a measure of anxiety. For example, one day, I heard an angry male voice in the lobby. A middle-aged man entered the room looking visibly distraught. I noticed that he staggered somewhat and looked around the room with large, watery blue eyes that had difficulty in focusing. He noticed me over by the doorway and challenged me whether or not I was there to ‘give him the boot.’ I responded that I was only there to help people carry their bags to their cars, which placated him somewhat, but I noticed the staff had cleared the room of clients and closed the inner doors. However, after receiving some food assistance he still refused to leave and loudly complained about his lack of money and the meagre assistance he received from this charity. The staff generally ignored him while a few looked at him with open disdain. I could tell from their whispers that they were debating what to do and from my knowledge of the staff I knew that a few would favour calling the police. A couple of the long-serving staff members managed to convince him to pick up his bags and he left after raising his fist in defiance. One staff member looked up the ceiling in relief while another staff member slumped in her chair and took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

These men were generally seen as ‘problem’ clients; however it is important to note that I am not trying to imply that it is the fault of the clients for producing these reactions among the staff. Rather, these behaviours did not coincide with the patterns of docility which the staff attempted to inculcate and produce through their methods of operations. Little consideration by the staff appeared to be paid to the clients’ feelings of disempowerment and what is arguably a legitimate reaction to disciplinary techniques. These occasional incidents or outbursts were however generally interpreted through the lens of gender. From time to time I witnessed similar acts of defiance on the part of female clients but who were rarely told not to return and were allocated a much higher degree of latitude than males. From my discussions with the staff and some clients, this kind of behaviour on the part of women was usually explained in terms of factors beyond their control: spousal abuse, illness or stress and elicited feelings of sympathy; whereas for males, similar behaviours were perceived as something akin to character flaws or individual personal failures and which seemed to produce tactics to exclude through referrals to other agencies or the state support services. One female client who I increasingly became friendly with over the course of my research was also perhaps one of the more unpopular clients among the staff. In retrospect, her mannerisms could be seen to reflect in a way some masculine behaviours that were not seen as favourable by the staff, such as her rather confrontational attitude which was described by one staff member to me as ‘having a chip on her shoulder.’ Rather than submitting to the evaluation process, she re-
plied to the staff’s queries curtly and with a minimum of information. Towards the end of my fieldwork she often refused to sit and instead stood during the entire interview process, filled out the form with the minimum of information and scrawled her signature with what could be described as a defiant flourish. While standing in line waiting for her food assistance she would sometimes look my way, smirk, and roll her eyes at the ceiling in frustration. Her behaviour was a source of discussion among the staff during this time and, among some staff members, complaints or barbed comments about her were conveyed to me, as the staff had become aware of us chatting outside after every visit. It is possible that her behaviour was perceived as aggressive and not in keeping with the typical client docility and, arguably, a deviant performance of gender more in keeping with the kind of masculinity that was excluded from this space. Yet the higher degree of tolerance of women who behaved in such a way indicates the perception that women in general are still situated as the vulnerable and the proper clients of the social welfare and charitable systems.

Conclusion

This article presented an overview of the evaluation procedures at an Icelandic charity ostensibly dedicated to helping women and children in order to shed some light on how gender, or more specifically forms of masculinity, are produced, reproduced and contested in a space that would at first glance not appear to be a site where masculinity would be negotiated. At the same time, I do not wish to overemphasise the impact of Icelandic charities and the knowledge they produce upon local understandings of the issues of poverty, gender, masculinity and social welfare, among others. However, I would suggest that the knowledge producing capabilities of charities do have an impact, especially given the media attention charities receive. The demarcation of their clientele into the groups of the vulnerable ‘worthy’ poor, widely reported on in the media, and the often overlooked or ignored marginalized ‘unworthy’ have long had and continue to have an impact upon the ways in which the social welfare programmes – both formal and voluntary – are gendered, organised and practiced. My research is admittedly heavily focused on observations of practice, the views of the staff, and the female voices of the clients and much more can be done to elicit the views of men who must negotiate these kinds of dominantly feminine spaces.

References


James G. Rice received his PhD in anthropology from the Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada, in 2007. The contribution to NORMA is one of a number of publications based on his PhD dissertation entitled The Charity Complex: An Ethnography of a Material Aid Agency in Reykjavík, Iceland, which was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The author is currently a NordForsk funded post-doctoral researcher at the Centre for Disability Studies, Social Science Research Institute, University of Iceland and a contributing member of the disability strand within the Nordic Centre of Excellence: Reassessing the Nordic Welfare Model project.