

‘Not our tradition’: calls in Sweden to ban fathers walking brides down the aisle

Popularised by Hollywood and the wedding of the crown princess, the patriarchal ‘handover’ is catching on. Now Lutherans want to stop it

From equal parental leave and an almost gender-balanced parliament to pole position in the EU’s gender equality index, [Sweden](#) is in many respects a world leader on feminism. But when it comes to marital traditions, trends appear to be moving in a different direction.

Traditionally in the [Swedish church](#), which is Lutheran, the bride and groom walk down the aisle together rather than the bride being accompanied by her father, as is often the case in Britain and the US.

But in recent years – perhaps inspired by the influence of global television, films and social media – more Swedish women are requesting to be “handed over” by their fathers.

The issue of what some Swedes describe as “the Hollywood tradition” has been simmering for some time – particularly in 2010, when Sweden’s crown princess, Victoria, decided to be [partly walked down the aisle](#) by her father, King Carl Gustaf.

In recent days, the debate has reignited after a motion was submitted to the autumn meeting of the Swedish church to ban the practice of fathers handing over their daughters at the altar. Sara Waldenfors, a pastor in Nylöse, Gothenburg, who along with Jesper Eneroth put forward the proposal for a ban, said there was no escaping the patriarchal symbolism.

“The relatively new trend that the father walks the bride down the aisle and passes her over to her new husband is not in our church tradition,” she told the *Observer*. “Even though the scene feels nice for future bridal couples, we can’t disregard what it symbolises: a father handing over a minor virgin to her new guardian.”

According to Swedish tradition, the bride and groom walk down the aisle together. Currently the decision over whether or not a bride can walk down the aisle with her father is down to individual priests.

How the Swedish church represents the liturgy of the wedding service is “a question that the Swedish church has to own”, said Waldenfors, a member of the opposition Social Democrats, adding that she was pleased that the motion had sparked the kind of discussion they were seeking.

“It has been a struggle to make it totally natural that women can be ordained to be priests. It has been a struggle for [same-sex couples](#) to be able to get married in the Swedish church. Shall we then amend a tradition in the church that isn’t ours and does not represent something that we can abide by?”

But other members of the church disagree. Henrik Lööv, an executive commissioner in Jönköping parish, said it was about allowing family inclusion in the ceremony rather than a “legal and patriarchal handover”.

“Through this, the bride or groom chooses to mark the importance of a relative in their life – a choice that means a lot to everyone involved.

“Bride handover has become increasingly popular in the last 10 to 15 years. It is probably due to inspiration from Hollywood but also from Crown Princess Victoria’s wedding, where the king walked with her a bit on the way to the altar,” said Lööv.

But, he added, the numbers involved were not large – about 10% of those he marries walk down the aisle with either their mother or father. The issue was causing debate, he said, because it touched on two important Swedish values: gender equality and individual freedom of choice.

“Those who are strongly committed to a ban believe that bride handover is a patriarchal custom, while many who are strongly against a ban find it difficult to accept that the church could decide how they marry at their wedding.”

Ultimately, he does not believe the motion to ban it will be successful because the Social Democrats will not find sufficient support from other groups. The Church of [Sweden](#) was contacted for comment but did not respond.

The debate comes despite the number of weddings falling in Sweden. Last year, 44,190 couples got married. In 2012, the figure was 56,240.