



# Gender Equality in Sweden

– a summary



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Today, gender equality policy in Sweden proceeds from an understanding that the unequal distribution of power between women and men is sustained by what is known as the gender-based power structure in society. The theory concerning this structure helps explain the lack of gender equality.

## Gender-based power structure

The gender-based power structure could be said to explain why our society lacks gender equality and why this imbalance persists despite measures to correct it. The presence of a gender-based power structure means, for instance, that society has the following characteristics:

- ▶ The separation of the sexes
- ▶ Men are considered superior and women inferior
- ▶ Men are considered the norm

The separation of the sexes may be illustrated by the sex segregated labour market and the unequal division of unpaid work in the home. Male superiority is expressed in such things as men's violence against women or men being paid more, having more power over their own lives and wielding more influence in public life. The male norm may be illustrated by the fact that new medicines (even for women) are usually tested only on men. It is also evident in such mundane things as our tendency to say 'women's football' but not 'men's football'.

If we do not succeed in breaking down the present gender-based power structure we will fail to achieve a gender equal society. The gender-based power structure is about the structural differences in society, and is not a description of differences between individuals.

## Aims and objectives of Swedish gender equality policy

The principal aim of the Swedish Government's gender equality policy is for women and men to have the same opportunities, rights and responsibilities in all areas of life. To achieve this aim requires both a strategy for how gender equality efforts are to be pursued and an organizational structure that meets the requirements of a society capable of guaranteeing equal opportunity. An active gender policy must also be knowledge-based and proceed from an analysis of the causes of gender inequality. Since 1994 gender statistics are a part of Sweden's Official Statistics.

## Policy goals

The overall aim of Sweden's gender equality policy is for women and men to have the same opportunities, rights and responsibilities in all areas of life. This implies for example:

- ▶ equal distribution of power and influence between women and men

- ▶ the same opportunities for women and men to achieve economic independence
- ▶ equal conditions and opportunities in respect of entrepreneurship, jobs, terms of work, employment, and advancement prospects at work
- ▶ equal access to education and training and equal opportunities for developing personal ambitions, interests and talents
- ▶ shared responsibility for children and the home
- ▶ freedom from sexual (gender-related) violence.

## A twofold strategy – Gender mainstreaming and focus areas

Gender mainstreaming is the principal model for gender equality work in Sweden. Each minister is responsible for fulfillment of the gender equality goals in his or her specific area. The Minister of Gender Equality coordinates this government policy. A gender equality perspective is to be incorporated at all levels and in all stages in the decision making process. Applying gender mainstreaming to public activities and policy-making brings light to the areas where special initiatives are needed most.

Although gender equality policy must be broadly based, a set of priorities – which may vary from time to time – must be defined. Five focus areas, which will be highlighted during the Government's term of office, have been identified.

### 1. Representation - equal access to positions of power and influence

One of the goals of Swedish gender equality policy is equal access by women and men to positions of power and influence. Equal representation of women and men in decision-making bodies is central to democracy. Both sexes must be represented in all areas of society and at all decision-making levels if they are to have an equal say in the development of their society. Equality of influence also ensures a broader basis for decision with regard to social policy issues.

As a result of purposeful, focused efforts to enhance women's power and influence within the community, Sweden is now a world leader in terms of the proportion of women representatives in directly elected political bodies. This applies at national, regional and local government level.

### 2. Equal pay for equal work and work of equal value

Women must be able to support themselves if they are to enjoy true freedom and independence. This ability is thus a fundamental condition of gender equality. The pay gap is mainly due to the traditional segregation of the labour

market, where 'female occupations' in the public sector and the care and social services are particularly low-paid.

Measures against gender-based pay differentials have been called for under the terms of the Gender Equality Act, however, the Act has failed to make inroads into structural pay differentials caused by *value discrimination*, i.e. the practice of rating jobs differently according to whether they are traditionally male- or female-dominated.

### 3. Violence committed by men against women, prostitution and trafficking in women for purposes of sexual exploitation

Violence committed by men against women constitutes a violation of their human rights and fundamental freedoms and impairs or nullifies their enjoyment of these rights and freedoms. It is also a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men.

Sweden has special legislation concerning male violence against women; gross violation of a woman's integrity. This offence is defined as repeated punishable acts directed by the perpetrator at a women with whom he has a close relationship.

In Sweden prostitution is regarded as a form of sexualized violence by men against women. If men did not consider it their right to buy and sexually exploit women and children, prostitution and trafficking in human beings for sexual purposes would not occur. The criminalization of the purchase of sexual services, in January 1999, constitutes implicit recognition that prostitution is a form of oppression of women and children and a serious social problem with damaging consequences for the individual victims and for society as a whole.

### 4. Men and gender equality

According to the gender-based power structure men are the norm. Efforts to promote gender equality have long focused on women, the subordinate sex in this system. But equality is about *women and men* having the *same* rights, responsibilities and opportunities. The creation of a gender equal society will not be achieved unless men and women work together to transform the conditions that govern the lives of both sexes.

The inclusion of men in gender equality work raises issues which are furnishing new insights into the future development of gender equality. A growing interest in gender equality among men has put new perspectives on the issue.

Research into men and masculinity will help increase our knowledge of the subject and is an important factor in efforts to bring about change. More men must be actively engaged in gender equality work and be prepared to openly oppose violence committed by men against women if we are to achieve a gender equal society.

### 5. Sexualisation of the public sphere

The increasing use of women's bodies to draw attention

to and sell goods or services is testimony to the growing sexualisation of modern society. Women and girls are objectified and sexualized in advertisements, in the mass media and on the Internet. Men are also portrayed in these media in ways that reflect prevailing gender prejudices, thus helping to create and perpetuate male stereotypes.

Constant exposure to these images clearly contributes to their normalization, to a blunting of sensibilities and the dangerous prospect of growing inured to sexual oppression, harassment and sexualized violence.

This is a worrying development which poses a serious obstacle to the achievement of gender equality.

The situation gives cause for concern and a great deal more knowledge is needed.

### Developments in gender equality since the 1970s\*

- » Women and men do not have to choose between paid work and children – they can have both.
- » Today women work equally in the public and the private sector while men work predominantly in the private sector.
- » Women combine paid work with care of children and the home to a larger extent than men.
- » Men combine paid work with economic, political and union power to a larger extent than women.
- » Directly elected political assemblies have an equal representation of women and men – indirectly elected assemblies do not.
- » The upper secondary school system and higher education are still sex-segregated.
- » The labour market is still sex-segregated.
- » Salary differences remain
- » Men have higher pensions than women.

### Some important facts\*

- » The proportion of women aged 20–64 in the labour force was 60% in 1970 and 79% in 2003. The corresponding proportions for men were 90% and 84% respectively.
- » The proportion of children aged 1–6 in municipal child care was 12% in 1972 and 83% in 2003.
- » In 1974, men accounted for 0% of days for which a parental allowance for caring of young children was paid, in 2003 for 17%.
- » The sex distribution among parliament members in 1973 was 15% women and 85% men. In 2002, the sex distribution was 45% women and 55% men.

### Progress so far\*

**1845** Equal inheritance rights for women and men.

**1864** Husbands lose legal right to strike their wives.

**1921** Women gain national suffrage and the right to hold office at the national level.

**1938** Maternity allowance established.

**1947** First woman Cabinet Minister: Karin Kock.

**1951** Women entitled to retain their Swedish citizenship upon marriage to foreign citizens.

**1955** Three months paid maternity leave for working women on birth of child.

**1971** Separate income tax assessment for wife and husband.

**1974** Parents entitled to share parental allowances upon childbirth.

**1975** New abortion law: a woman has the right to decide until the 12th week.

**1980** Law against sex discrimination in employment;

**1982** All assault and battery against women even if committed on private property subject to public prosecution.

**1994** Gender statistics made part of Sweden's Official Statistics.

**1995** At least one month of parental leave must be used by mother and one by father ("mummy/daddy month");

**1998** Act on Violence against Women (amendment of Penal Code);

**1999** Law prohibiting the purchase of sexual services.

**2002** Parental leave: Number of days increases with 30 sickness benefit days to 480 days, 60 of which are reserved for each parent and cannot be transferred.

**2004** The Swedish Government adopts a strategy for the integration of gender equality into the Government Offices.

\* Source: "Women and men in Sweden, Facts and figures 2004", Statistics Sweden

## Read more about gender equality policy in Sweden

The Government Offices website contains information and publications on gender equality. Some of the publications can be ordered as a printed version via the website.

## Address of the Government Offices website

<http://www.sweden.gov.se/>

Click "Gender equality" in the frame for "Subject areas".

*Or use the direct link:*

<http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/4096>

## Ordering material via the website:

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