

Equality Between Women & Men in Sweden — Myth or Reality?

by Christina Erneling

Side by Side is the title of a report presented by Sweden at the Third UN Women's Conference in Nairobi 1986.¹ This report makes it clear that in spite of impressive and far-reaching changes, they are not walking side by side. Women and men are not employed, educated, caring for children or participating in politics on the basis of ability or interest, but on the basis of gender.

This does not fit the common and prevalent picture of Sweden as a country where gender equality is an accomplished fact. The Swedes themselves, foreign visitors and observers abroad, often think that equality is further advanced in Sweden than anywhere else. The aims, methods and resulting equality have been widely published, and it is easy to believe that Swedish women have achieved all they could possibly wish for. But this is not the case, i.e. the ideas behind the social reforms differ from actual behaviour. There may be a general consensus about equality in Sweden, and social reforms and radical legislation may have resulted in equal opportunities, but the lives of women and men are still very much formed by traditional gender roles.

To illustrate the actual accomplishments as well as the shortcomings I will consider an imaginary family with two fictional twins, one female and the other male. In addition to this survey, based on the situation in 1985, I will briefly consider some attempts to deal with the remaining inequalities and also ask to what extent the Swedish experience can be of relevance to other countries.

Anna and Erik

Let me turn to my fictional twins, Anna and Erik, and their parents. Since my aim is not to illustrate an historical development but the status of equality in contemporary Sweden, we have to pretend that

the living conditions throughout the lives of the two are those typical of 1985, statistically speaking. Comprehensive data for the period after 1985 is difficult to find; hence, any recent changes cannot be considered.

Their Parents

First a few words about Anna's and Erik's parents, keeping in mind that they too are statistical abstractions or types. Their names are Eva and Karl and they are in their late twenties. They are living in an apartment building in a suburb of one of Sweden's larger cities not far from the town where they were born and raised. They had been living together for a few years, but when they decided it was time to have children, they, like some of their friends, married.² Belonging to the small group of university educated Swedes (30%), they both have well-paid, full-time jobs, but Eva's salary is only 80% of Karl's. He works as an engineer in a private company and she works as a psychologist in a public school. To a large extent they share household chores, but Eva tends to do more of the cooking and cleaning, while Karl is responsible for the car and their finances. They see no problem with this division of labour, since they both think they are doing what they are good at as well as what they like doing.

Parental Insurance

Although it was Eva who made the final decision to stop taking the contraceptive pill and become pregnant, they are both very much involved in preparing for the birth of the twins. Karl accompanies Eva to prenatal classes and both have met with the midwife who will assist with the delivery. Karl had also been instructed how to help Eva during the delivery. When the time comes, he accompanies her to the

hospital, bringing his camera. He, however, gets too excited to take pictures, especially since he is the first to hold the twins.

By law, Karl is entitled to ten days of paid leave from his job, so he stays home with Eva and the twins — Anna and Erik — for a week, and later continues to help Eva when he gets home from work. Eva has not quit her job, but thanks to the parental insurance (introduced in 1974) she can take up to 270 days of paid leave and an additional 90 days with reduced monetary compensation. The insurance can be shared equally between the parents, so Karl could have stayed home but he opts not to use it except for a month, when Eva goes back to work to help out with a staff shortage and to make sure she doesn't lose all contact with her work.³ Karl is in fact the first father at his work place to use part of his parental insurance and has to cope with the ridicule of his work mates. They think he does the right thing, but can't help making fun of him, and his boss even complains that an important order is getting delayed due to his absence.

At the Daycare Centre

Even before the twins were born, Eva and Karl applied for daycare places so that Eva could get back to work (mothers of pre-school children have the highest employment rate among Swedish women) when she is no longer entitled to paid parental leave.

When Anna and Erik turn one year old she is back at her old job, but she's working only part-time. Although Eva and Karl think daycare stimulates and is even necessary for a healthy development, they are convinced that eight hours in daycare 5 days a week is too much for pre-school children. Since by law they have the possibility of working six hour days with

corresponding reduction in pay until Anna and Erik are eight years old, Eva decides to do just that.⁴

The daycare centre is run by the municipal government and is located five minutes from the town house where the family moved after Anna and Erik were born. It is subsidized by taxes, but Eva and Karl pay a fee which is proportionate to their income. Anna and Erik could have been placed in a family daycare home instead, but their parents prefer the daycare with its additional educational facilities. They are lucky to have this choice since there are only daycare places for half of all pre-school children in the country.⁵ This makes it difficult for parents, especially in rural areas, to get this kind of care for their children.

What then are the days at the daycare centre like for Anna and Erik? During the first two weeks they are accompanied by their mother, who has paid leave from her work, to ease the transition and so that she gets to know the teachers. The children are divided into smaller groups and Anna and Erik are placed in a group of five children of various ages. The daycare is open from 6.30 am to 6.30 pm and there is always at least one adult to 4-5 children around to keep an eye on them and to stimulate their play. Together they also make field trips and visit different parents' work places. Except for one male teacher (only 5% are male) all are female and most have university educations.

As they grow older, Anna's and Erik's days become more structured and at six they begin pre-school, which is next door. Anna enjoys this a lot but Erik is a bit wilder and has a hard time settling down to intellectual activities. As before, he occasionally joins his sister when she plays with dolls. Both enjoy pre-school tremendously and often protest when Eva comes to pick them up.

But what happens when they get sick? They obviously have to stay home. This is no problem even if their grandparents don't live close by and the neighbours all work, since their parents have the right to take up to 60 days of paid leave for each twin, each year. This means that both get compensated by 90% of their salary, so it doesn't matter much who stays home and, like most other parents, Eva and Karl take turns depending on whoever it is most convenient for. Karl, a bit surprisingly, takes as much time off as Eva.

At Home

As infants and toddlers, Anna's and Erik's lives are very similar, but they have brought changes to the lives of their parents, or at least to Eva's life. She has taken a year off from her work, missed some promotion and educational possibilities and earns less, since she works only 30 hours a week. She has also got more household chores and seems to be doing a greater share of them. In fact, she spends three times as much on this as Karl, who continues to take care of finances and the car. He, on the other hand, continues to work full-time, has been promoted several times and spends one evening each week up-dating his education and another playing soccer. Although he thinks he should do his fair share at home and look after Anna and Erik more, he is less involved.

Divorce

Even if Eva's and Karl's marriage has few problems, they often argue about house work and whose turn it is to look after Anna and Erik. This is the main reason why, when there is a crisis in their marriage, Eva suggests divorce. She can just as well be on her own because she is already doing most of the work and has no time for recreational activities. The crisis is resolved, but if it hadn't been she and Karl would have agreed to joint custody but Anna and Erik would have continued to live with their mother. Karl would have had to pay child support but if he, for some reason, was unable to do this, the national government would have provided a "maintenance advance" to Anna and Erik.⁶

In School

When Anna and Erik turn seven it is time for school. What it is like in school? The building is located next to the daycare centre, so they feel very much at home from the beginning. Also, adjacent to the school is a recreation centre. This is open to all children under twelve. Here they play, are involved in different activities and get a snack before Eva picks them up later in the afternoon. To ease the transition and make the new environment less threatening, Eva again takes a few days of paid leave and accompanies them to

school. Karl could have done it just as well but he doesn't have the time because of an important project at work, and promises instead to be there on parent's day (2 days per year paid leave).

Some of Anna's and Erik's class mates are from the daycare and they have also met their teacher, Miss Svenson, several times when she picked up her son who belonged to their daycare group. The school is of course co-educational and during the first couple of years Anna and Erik will study exactly the same subjects — mathematics, Swedish, history, geography, religious studies, music and economics, as well as handicrafts and wood working. They'll also receive sex education, which they are already familiar with from daycare. Gender roles and differences between men and women play an important role in this and they see plays, hear different speakers and again, visit different work places to become familiar with different and non-traditional vocations. In spite of this, their school experiences turn out to be very different. Erik is initially not very interested in school work but with the encouragement of the teacher, becomes very good, especially in mathematics. Anna, on the other hand, is very interested and dedicated but gradually loses interest with the result that her grades fall, except in English which she loves.

Also, at home their lives begin to diverge, reverting to a more traditional gender pattern. For example, Anna enjoys helping her mother with cooking and keeping her room and clothes tidy, while Erik couldn't care less and spends most of his time playing on the computer.

A few years later when the two have become teenagers and it is time to choose what areas to specialize in, it is only natural that Anna chooses nursing, where 90% of the students are girls and Erik technical subjects where the picture is the reverse, with 90% boys. Thus, it is quite unusual when Anna's best friend decides to start technical high school. This idea came from a female speaker who had been invited by the school to speak about non-traditional vocational choices. Anna's friend is constantly praised by adults for her choice, but spends quite a lot of time with Anna debating the pros and cons of her decision. She knows that even if the number of girls in technical high schools has doubled since the seventies, they are

still a very small minority, and she worries about making friends and competing with the boys, whom she thinks are quite aggressive.

Anna finds high school quite boring and to get a break before university and earn some money she gets a job as a nurse's aide. Erik thinks this is a good idea, because he too is tired of school but figures that he will get a break from the books during his one year of compulsory military training. Anna tells Erik that the military is just what he needs so he can finally learn to make his bed and keep his things tidy. She doesn't have military duty but as long as she doesn't have children, she might be called to participate in month-long civil defense courses.

Abortion

One day when Anna gets home from work to the one bedroom apartment she is renting, she is met by her best friend in tears. She is pregnant and doesn't know what to do. Anna is very surprised and even disappointed and angrily asks her friend why she has been so stupid. Why has she not seen the school nurse or visited the free contraceptive clinic at the hospital to get contraceptive pills as most of their friends have done? She soon feels sorry for her friend and promises to accompany her to the abortion clinic at the hospital. Here they speak to a female social worker who tells them what they already know, namely that since 1975 abortion is unrestricted up to the 18th week, but during the 12th to 18th week it has to be approved by a special committee. She also tells them that fewer teenagers become pregnant or have abortions, something she attributes to sex education in the schools and to free contraceptive counselling. After speaking to the social worker one more time, Anna's friend decides to have an abortion, and is booked for the procedure the next week.⁷

At University

As you remember, both Eva and Karl were university educated so it is natural for both Anna and Erik to go on to university. They don't have to pay tuition fees and to support themselves they can take out student loans.

Anna uses her experience as a nurse's aide to boost her grades and gets accepted

into a very competitive school of nursing, while Erik studies physics. Although a little over 50% of the students are women, Erik has just a few girls in his class because most women study nursing, languages or train to become pre-school teachers or social workers. Thus, neither Anna nor Erik break with the traditional gender roles prevalent in higher education.⁸

Anna contemplates continuing to graduate school since there is an especially good program in nursing but decides against it when she learns that only 23% of all Ph.D. graduates are female. She also doubts her own ability to finish and thinks she faces an uncertain future, concluding that it is better to start working as a nurse. Erik, on the other hand, feels very comfortable in the male dominated environment, where only 5% of the teachers are women, and eventually gets his PhD in physics.

At Work

Finally it is time for Anna and Erik to enter the work force. Both quickly find jobs.⁹ Erik works in a governmental space agency and Anna at the hospital in her home town. He works full-time while she opts for part-time since she wants to pursue her interest in politics. Nursing, like most social welfare and caring jobs, offers flexible hours and not surprisingly, women dominate this field.¹⁰ Both Anna's and Erik's bosses are male, although Anna works in a predominantly female work place. This does not bother them much since this is the case everywhere.¹¹

There is only one nurse on Anna's ward working full-time, and he is male. Due to the principle of equal pay for equal work laid down in the collective agreement, he is on the same salary scale as the other nurses, but he complains that he earns less than his friends who work in more male-dominated work places, such as a factory, even if they have less education than he has. At Erik's space agency there is only one woman among twenty employees. She, like the rest of the researchers, has a PhD but earns less than they do, and when her promotion is passed over in favour of one of her male colleagues she decides to take her case to the Labour Court. She claims that the employer has violated the *Equal Opportunities Act* (1981), which prohibits discrimination on the basis of

sex and makes it incumbent on the employer to promote equality. She wins the case, but by then has accepted a position in a hospital which she hopes is less prejudiced against women.

In Politics

Anna got interested in politics because of her concern for environmental issues but she has no ambitions to become a full-time politician (only 10% are women). She, however, eventually ends up in parliament (where there are 30% women) where, given her background, she sits on the Standing Committee on Health and Social Welfare. She does not even consider the possibility of serving on "heavier" and male dominated committees such as defence or economics. She tells Erik that all important political decisions are made in these committees, and complains that although a third of all members are women, almost all influential positions, such as the chair, are held by men.

For a short time she is also active in her trade union (90% of all Swedes belong to a trade union) and here as in politics she finds that almost all top positions (95%) are held by men.

Inequality in Anna's and Erik's Lives

By now, in her late twenties, Anna has become aware of inequalities at the work place, in politics, in education and in the home. For a short time she joins a feminist group, but leaves it after finding its members' confrontational style and ideas out of tune with her own and most women's views and values. She instead tries to work for equality issues (like more women in politics and in senior supervisory positions) in her political party and constantly nags her brother to join a group of men discussing their gender role. Erik refuses, arguing that men are just as oppressed as women — they die younger and more often from stress related diseases like heart attacks, and have more drug and drinking problems, lose contact with their children in case of divorce and have to pay child support.

Anna agrees with all of this but points out that she, in spite of the same upbringing and opportunities and all the reforms and laws for equality, has lower education, earns less money, works in a traditional female profession and has less

opportunity to have decision making or supervisory positions than her brother. And it is clear that Erik's girl friend does much more house work and is mainly responsible for the care of their one year old adopted Korean girl.¹²

Why have all the reforms, and all the discussions in the mass media, not made her equal to her brother? Why are they not walking side by side, but following traditional gender paths? Why do their lives exhibit clear gender differences? What needs to be done?

Concluding Remarks

Perhaps Sweden is closer to achieving gender equality than most countries, but compared to other industrialized countries in the Western World, Sweden still has:

- 1) One of the highest gender segregations in employment, with virtually one labour market for women and one for men. Women's occupational choices are an extension of their traditional role in care and service, now doing for pay what they used to do free of charge in the home.
- 2) The highest rate of part-time work among women (45%).
- 3) One of the lowest rates of women in senior executive positions (5%), which is especially remarkable given that more than 80% of all Swedish women work outside the home.
- 4) A very low rate of women in post graduate education and research (23% of all Ph.D.s and 5% of university professors are women).
- 5) Very few women in decision-making positions, in spite of high political representation.
- 6) Many fewer men than women responsible for caring for children and the home, in spite of radical reforms like the parental insurance scheme.

In general, this clearly shows that it is very difficult to bring about equality, and that equal opportunities and public policies do not automatically or quickly lead to change. In spite of all the progressive reforms and laws, and a general commit-

ment to the goals of equality, Swedish women still lack the opportunities of men. This is especially true when it comes to influential or decision making positions in politics or in the work place. Both marxists and feminists have pointed out that women are no longer economically and socially dependent on individual men, their fathers or husbands, but they are still dependent on men. The private dependence has been reproduced in the public sphere because here men still make all important decisions and have economic power. Furthermore, even if nearly as many women as men work outside the home, women are mainly found in traditional women's jobs caring for the sick, the handicapped, the old and children.

Attempts to deal with these glaring examples of remaining inequality have been made. Let me mention just a few. The "Fredrika Bremer Association," which is the oldest apolitical women's association has lobbied private firms to include more women on their boards of directors. In typical Swedish style this has been done in a non-confrontational way by arguing that women would make the boards more effective and the companies more successful. Marxists also stress the importance of economic power but tend to subsume women's issues under class equality as in, for example, the Swedish communist party which has no special women's organization.

As already mentioned, the feminist movement is relatively weak in Sweden and their call for consciousness raising to change people's attitudes and behaviour has not been very influential, although it is generally agreed that it is crucial to change attitudes, for example, in education. Here the stress has been on trying to change vocational decisions, steering the students away from gender-biased choices. There have also been several programs encouraging industries to employ women. Some of them have been successful but too few to change the the real picture.¹³ Furthermore, to get more men to take responsibility for children and the home, the idea of forcing men, through legislation, to use part of the parental insurance has been seriously discussed.

So far these and other attempts have not radically changed the situation, and this raises some challenging questions. For example, how can these facts (points 1-6 above) be explained? Why have the

Swedes not achieved more gender equality, given their general consensus and progressive reforms? Why is the myth of Sweden as a model for equality so widespread, given that it, in many respects, is less equal than other countries? What are the strengths and weaknesses of public policies and legislation? How can long-standing patterns of behaviour and attitudes be changed?

Given this, what significance has the Swedish experience for other countries, especially for countries outside of Scandinavia?

First, two unique factors: Swedish homogeneity and broad consensus about equality issues and the trust in public policies are not found to a great extent outside Scandinavia, making it difficult to generalize to other contexts and conditions.

Secondly, it shows that the move toward equality is extremely difficult and slow even when there is public commitment to its goals and progressive reforms to enable change of long standing attitudes and patterns of behaviour.

But let me end on a more positive note: even if Swedish women have not achieved all they want; even if the reality is not as rosy as the myth makes it seem, Anna and her sisters have many things, like parental insurance, daycare and abortion, which women in many other countries are still fighting for. This alone makes it interesting and important to study Sweden and learn from its accomplishments and shortcomings.

Sources

Ericsson, Y. and R. Eriksson (eds). *Side by Side. A Report on Equality Between Women and Men in Sweden 1985*. Stockholm: Gotab, 1985.

Herrström, S., "Swedish Family Policy," in *Current Sweden*, # 348. The Swedish Institute, September 1986.

Liljeström, R., Furst-Mellström, G. and G. Liljeström-Svensson. *Sex Roles in Transition*. Stockholm: Göteborgs Offsettryckeri, 1975.

Popenoe, D., "What is happening to the Family in Sweden," in *Social Change in Sweden*, #36, The Swedish Institute, December 1986.




**TORONTO
WOMEN'S BOOKSTORE**

**UNHOLY ALLIANCES:
NEW WOMEN'S
FICTION**

Ed. Louise Rafkin
\$14.50

**VEILED COUNTRIES/
LIVES**

Marie-Claire Blais
\$12.95

**THE SISTERHOOD:
THE TRUE STORY OF
THE WOMEN WHO
CHANGED THE
WORLD**

Maria Cohen
\$27.00

THE PASSION

Jeanette Winterson
\$27.95

73 HARBORD STREET
TORONTO, ONTARIO, M5S 1G4
(416) 922-8744 • MONDAY
THROUGH SATURDAY 10:30
TO 6:00 • FRIDAY 10:30 TO
8:00 • WHEELCHAIR ACCESS

Reimer, R.A., "Work and Family in Sweden", in *Social Change in Sweden*, # 34, The Swedish Institute, April 1986.

Sidel, R., "What is to be Done? Lessons From Sweden." Reprinted from *Women and Children Last, the Plight of Poor Women in Affluent America*. (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986). New York: The Swedish Information Service, 1986.

Trost, J., "Parental Benefits — A Study of Men's Behaviour and Views," in *Social Change in Sweden*, # 29. The Swedish Institute, October 1983.

Wistrand, B. *Swedish Women on the Move*. Tr. and ed. by J. Rosen. Udevalla: Bohuslänningens AB, 1981.

The Changing Role of the Male. Summary of a report by the Working Party of the Male, Ministry of Labour, Sweden. Tr. by D. Knight. Stockholm, 1986.

Child Care in Sweden. Facta Sheets on Sweden. The Swedish Institute, April 1987.

Equality Between Men and Women in Sweden. Facta Sheets on Sweden. The Swedish Institute, May 1987.

Family Planning in Sweden. Facta Sheets on Sweden. The Swedish Institute, August 1986.

Christina E. Erneling is a Ph.D. student in Philosophy at York University. She was born and raised in Sweden.

**The above material can
be obtained free of charge
from:**

**The Swedish
Institute
Box 7434, S-103 91
Stockholm, Sweden**

**or from your nearest
Swedish Consulate or
Embassy.**

¹*Side by Side. A Report on Equality Between Women and Men in Sweden 1985*. Stockholm: Gotab, 1985.

²The rate of non-marital cohabitation in Sweden is the highest in the industrialized world and the marriage rate the lowest; having children is not considered an important reason to get married.

³The younger the father is, the more likely he is to take advantage of the parental insurance. But only one father in five actually does this, and compared to women, they stay home a much shorter period of time — 41 days on average.

⁴All parents get child allowances and also a means tested housing allowance. The child allowance is approximately 1,000 Canadian dollars per year and child.

⁵The aim of the government is to be able to offer a daycare place to every child who needs it by 1991.

⁶The divorce rate falls just behind the United States which has the highest rate, but with so many couples living together without being married it is difficult to estimate the number of families that break up.

⁷95% of all abortions are done on an out-patient basis before the 12th week.

⁸Only in subjects like business administration and economics is there an equal gender balance.

⁹The unemployment rate (3%) is the same for men and women.

¹⁰Swedish women have the highest employment participation rate in the world, but they also have one of the highest percentages of women working part-time (45% compared to male 7%), much higher than for example France (20%), USA (23.3%) and West Germany (30%).

¹¹Only 5% of all senior supervisors or executives are women, which is much lower than other countries, for example England, France, USA and West Germany.

¹²Adoptive parents have the same rights as birth parents including parental leave.

¹³In general, so called quotas are untried in Sweden, with the exception of regional support to firms relocating in rural areas which is only awarded if 40% of the created jobs are for women.