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Changing Labour Market and Gender Equality: The Role of Policy

CREATING CONDITIONS FOR WOMEN'S ACCESS TO TOP POSITIONS: SWEDEN

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FROM A "WOMEN'S ISSUE" TO A "POWER ISSUE"

1. Sweden is well known for being 'more' equal when it comes to equality between women and men, compared to most other countries. This concerns politics and the participation on the labour market overall. It is considered 'normal' for women in Sweden to have a family and to work and have a career. It is made possible through a number of support systems, where day-care for children is an important one. It is also due to the shift in thinking and talking, from considering equality a 'women's issue' to a 'society issue' or an 'organisation issue'. Creating equal terms for women and men on the labour market involves changing organisational structures. This implies working with women and *men*. Creating conditions for women's access is a question of power. The power-perspective is essential when working for change in organisations, which is mainly a contribution from gender-research in the field.

2. Equality issues concern several perspectives, one of them is power and influence. There is a visible difference in Sweden between women's position in politics and in business. On management positions men are in a majority at all levels, particularly on top positions in private industry (Statistics Sweden 1997).

Women and men on top management levels

3. In a report of a committee of inquiry a survey of Swedish industry was carried out to supplement available statistics on the proportion of women at board and top management level (Höök, 1994). Results showed that a majority of all companies in private industry in Sweden have top management consisting entirely of men, and the top management of 99 per cent of the companies in the survey is dominated by men. The proportion of women at top management level is on average 8 per cent. The corresponding figure for privately owned companies is 6 per cent. The most common area of responsibility for women is personnel. Among the largest companies in the study, with over 5000 employees, the proportion of women at top management level was less, namely 2 per cent. At the level directly below the top management, companies have an average proportion of women of 16 per cent.

Management training

4. A clear majority (71 per cent) of companies have a management training programme for senior managers. The proportion of female participants on internal and external management training courses is about 15 per cent. Only 14 per cent of the companies have special management training for women. Just over half of the companies have an organised equal opportunities programme. Among privately-owned companies, 44 per cent do not have an organised equal opportunities programme. Half of the companies do not have a plan of action for equality between men and women, that they are required by law to have (Höök, 1994). One in three companies says, however, that they have an explicit policy of wishing to increase the number of women managers. There is a will to change in some organisations. And there are

people working on testing, developing and disseminating ideas about how to increase the number of women in management positions. This work will be explored further in this paper.

WORKING FOR CHANGE

5. The results presented in this section are structured around interviews carried out with agents of change in this field (Wahl, 1995). The agents of change fall mainly into two categories; external agents and internal agents. The external agents are often consultants commissioned by organisations to carry out projects. There are also consultants who arrange independent programmes, or managerial training courses, that are open for managers from different organisations. The internal agents of change work with projects in organisations, where they themselves are employed. These people may have carried out individual projects, or, which is more usual, they may have experience of a variety of different kinds of forms of work. All the agents interviewed are women.

6. There is more experience and competence in this field in the public sector, and in state enterprises, than in private business. This was resolved by the external agents of change often having experience of working both in the public and the private sector. Among the internal agents of change interviewed, a couple were employed by a state enterprise. In this way, attention was focused on the private sector while at the same time the experiences and competence from the public sector was brought to bear.

Methods

7. There are many methods available for development programmes aiming at increasing the number of women in executive positions. Some themes are taken up by many of the change agents, for example, mentoring programmes, or managerial training for women, but the concrete shape given to these basic ideas can differ. Besides the programme itself, there is often a great deal of work carried out alongside it. This consists of gaining a basis of support for the project in the organisation by numerous discussions and other activities. The importance to explain the point of the work carried out, and to show that responsibility for this matter rests in the hands of the executives, is emphasised in the interviews. Many of the agents of change, especially the internal agents, invest a great deal of time in this work of gaining acceptance for the programme, which is often not the visible part of it. The internal agents regard themselves specialists or experts in a field of competence that is important for operations in the organisation. The programmes may be more or less integrated with the organisations other activities.

Integration and setting goals

8. One way of integrating activities in the work of the organisation is to set up specific goals with the backing of senior management, for how great percentage of managers are to be women at a particular point in time. In this way activities are linked in to a desired result, and managers become involved in a dialogue as to what is desirable at the same time as it is made clear to them that it is their responsibility to fulfil these goals and to follow them up. This is described as a *knowledge process* and a *power process*. Individual projects must not end up outside the organisation since they then only lead to learning by the women themselves, their personal development, while the organisation as a whole does not 'learn' anything. The increased awareness and knowledge of the women participating is then not made sufficient

use of in the organisation. Without this kind of integration, it is not unlikely that the consequences will be increased frustration on the part of the women or that the women will quite simply leave the organisation.

Recruitment and appointments

9. Another method used to integrate activities in operations was to work on recruitment and appointments to managerial posts. Women were then actively promoted for recruitment by the change agents. A general view expressed in the interviews was that male managers do not *see* women, they do not take note of women's competence. The agents continually run up against the objection that *there are no women* suitable for this kind of post. The agents argue, however, that there are women available if the effort is made to *see* them. The agents of change therefore perceive it as their task to promote women and make them visible, and to get male managers to learn to think in a different way. Always having women candidates when recruiting is a first step for women to be subsequently appointed to managerial posts.

10. In one organisation senior management had arrived at the strategic decision that there should always be a man and a woman involved in all recruitment processes in order to improve competence in taking note of and assessing candidates. Two other decisions made by this group were never to have single-sex project groups, and always to have a section on gender aspects in all management training.

11. On one occasion, in the same organisation, a large number of managers had been appointed, but only among them a few women. The change agent followed up these appointments by interviewing both managers and female applicants. It emerged that most men, the managers, did not understand the problem at all. They claimed that their decisions were based exclusively on competence. They had, however, difficulties in defining what competence was. The explanation that eventually emerged was often some definite idea along the lines that *women cannot be put in charge of male sales staff*. This example illustrates the way concepts like competence are gendered in organisations. The women applicants had often been told *you are the second best*. Only where there had previously been women managers were women encouraged to apply. The follow-up report itself attracted a lot of attention in the organisation and contributed to the problem becoming visible and being discussed. During the following three years, there was a marked increase in the number of women managers in the organisation, from 38 to 81. According to the agent interviewed, this was due to managers starting to think in a different way. One male manager expressed this by saying that *he spent more time listening to women*.

Managerial training

12. One part of the integration theme referred to by a number of agents was to influence the existing managerial training of the organisations in various ways. In some cases it had been possible to influence the content by inserting sections dealing with the area of men and women. This often opened up a dialogue between men and women on these issues, which most agents considered to be of importance for the overall result.

13. Another way of influencing the existing managerial training is to change the 'normal' gender distribution, i.e. that 90-95 per cent of the participants usually are men. Accepting women for managerial training, regardless of whether the content is affected or not, is an important step in the process of making women visible in the organisation. One example was the case of how an initial demand that there be at least two women on each course eventually, after hard work, led to there being 37-40 per cent of women on the courses. In this case, agents in the organisation drew up name lists of women. They put pressure on the managers and put forward proposals for women.

Networks

14. Establishing networks with women has become a common method. It is a form for getting a dialogue among women started, that can eventually lead to proposals for demands and activities. There are many forms of networks; external and internal, formal and informal. The internal agents have themselves participated in initiating and starting networks in their own organisations. Sometimes networks starts up limited to a small group of women, that function as a pressure group or a group that can be consulted by the senior management. Networks often grow very strong in organisations, and sometimes there is a need for sub-groups, or local networks, at the same time.

15. Some networks receive funding from the company. Seminars, lectures, book circles, theatre visits etc are arranged by the networks. One network, that was described, led to the establishment of an extensive mentoring programme within the organisation. It illustrates how a network may be the forum where ideas are born and developed. The external agents described how spontaneous networks of women often become the result of a training or mentoring programme.

Projects

16. Another method used by a number of agents was to work with project groups. This can take place within the framework of networks, training or mentoring programmes. One example was women working on very concrete issues from a gender-perspective, over a period of time, and reported back to top management on the results. This had at least two good effects: new ideas were developed and women's competence was made visible. Sometimes project groups included both women and men. Besides the two effects already mentioned, a dialogue was initiated between men and women around these issues.

Managerial training for women

17. The dominant method in the work of introducing changes was managerial training for women. It has existed, in different forms, since the beginning of the 1980s. Previously, these training programmes were often carried out as more free-standing initiatives. Over time it has become clear that these need to be based in the organisation in the various ways described above. Working with women only has been, and still is, an important part of the method. Women are in need of knowledge in this area, and they need to talk to one another about their experiences in organisations. To what extent gender theories are integrated in the training varies considerably. Some of the agents work very deliberately on the basis of a gender perspective in training, and some work in a more gender-blind manner, i.e. do not use a gender perspective on management. The perspective used is important for the content of training.

18. One internal agent worked with an institute for managerial development for women in a corporation. The institute arranged managerial courses at an advanced level, as well as courses for supervisors. The women were selected by the company, and about 120 women had attended courses at the institute. Working with a combination of seminars and projects as in this training is a pattern that reoccurs in numerous descriptions of managerial training for women.

Mentoring programmes

19. Mentoring programmes exist in various guises. They can be external or internal, and with or without a gender perspective. Women apply to some mentoring programmes and are selected to others. Last but not least, there are differing relationships to mentors. Mentors, who are most often men, can be regarded as examples, who share their knowledge and experience with their protégées, who are those who do the learning. Another way of regarding mentors is that they are influential men, who have never had the experience working or discussing with women on equal terms. It depends on whether the mentoring programme is regarded as managerial training for women or as managerial training for women and men, where the mentor relationship involves a process of mutual learning.

20. Regardless of this difference in the basic perception, almost all agents of change describe how the mentors (mostly men) usually gain new insights through the programme, which was something they did not always anticipate. Several forms of mentoring programmes were described. Sometimes men are also accepted as protégés, as women sometimes are mentors. Usually the programme consists of a combination of seminars, project work and meetings between mentor and protégée. Sometimes the agent integrate the mentoring programme in the organisation in the form of gaining support from the senior management level. It was also underlined that it was important that the managers of the women participating were contacted and informed. They became more conscious of the gender issue in the organisation as well as of their own responsibility for ensuring that use is made of women’s competence.

The “maturity axis” for work on change

21. As a conclusion of the methods described, some factors have been isolated that may vary from programme to programme. These are the *form* (only women, or women and men), the *perspective* (gender blind or with a gender perspective) and the degree of *integration* in the organisation. Most projects and programmes can be described with the assistance of these factors by varying the form, the perspective and the degree of integration that predominates. This means, for instance that a mentoring programme may be described in a number of ways depending on how it is organised and according to the perspective on which it is based.

FORM	Women only	Women and men	
PERSPECTIVE	Gender perspective	Gender-blind	perspective
INTEGRATION	Free-standing	Integrated	

22. A number of combinations of these three factors exist today as regards mentoring programmes and managerial training programmes for women. There seems to be a maturity axis affecting how work is carried out.

23. For example there is a maturity axis for work on managerial training for women where there is often a programme for women only, with or without a gender perspective, that is not especially well integrated in the organisation in the beginning. With the gender perspective it may be called ‘individual development’. Without the gender perspective, it might be called a ‘confidence-building course’. If the organisation is allowed to carry on with this type of work, the following often occur:

- A tendency towards integration with men
- More projects in various forms are permitted to run at the same time
- Mistakes are also allowed without the issue being removed from the agenda

Women only programmes

24. Experience led to the realisation that a specific programme for women must be integrated into the organisation. These programmes solely for women often have the form of networks and project groups. These now focus on women who want to increase their knowledge, and acquire more scope (power). Women in the organisation who want to be seen and heard, both to each other and in the organisation as a whole. The results are not difficult to see, according to the agents interviewed. These can be summarised under the following headings:

- An increased number of women in managerial posts
- An increased visibility of women in the organisation
- An increased awareness on the part of women
- A new insight and interest on the part of men
- Changed perceptions in the organisation

A gender perspective

25. As the importance of integrating the woman's programme in the organisation's activities has been more clearly realised, men have become more involved in the process than previously. It is important to realise that men are carriers of the structures that have been created by and for men. Men reproduce these structures uncritically, unless they learn to think in a different way. Integrating men in the programmes is not completely without problems therefore. It is important to introduce a gender perspective in the programmes, so that this acquisition of knowledge and new way of thinking can take place.

26. Having men involved in a mentoring programme for example can be advantageous if there is a gender perspective. Then men's awareness is increased, at the same time as a dialogue is initiated between men and women. If there is a gender-blind perspective, there is a risk, on the contrary, that men will dominate and that the norms of male dominance will simply be recreated. Women in the programmes will then not obtain any arguments for this being a matter for the organisation, but will be expected to deal with it themselves at the individual level. The result will often be a lack of understanding in the organisation as to why the activities carried out are important. Programmes with gender-blind perspective easily lead to deficiencies in the development of knowledge in many ways therefore.

27. All agents of change were easily able to give an affirmative answer to the question of whether the ventures they were involved in produced results. Regardless of the methods or perspectives used, there was clearly visible results. A number of themes are mentioned repeatedly as the most important results.

Increased numbers of women

28. A number of agents emphasised that the programmes offered had an effect on the actual working situation of the women. One-off training efforts may lead to results in the form of new posts for women who have taken part, but it is more usual for these results to be viewed in connection with various initiatives taken by the organisation. It is again stressed how important it is for these initiatives to be accepted by the organisation, and the decisive importance of the senior management and management becoming more aware of these issues, if any real changes are to take place in women's work situation. Several agents describe the results as associated with an increase in the number of women holding managerial positions, or as an increased mobility on the part of women.

Increased visibility of women

29. The other kind of result described is the increased visibility of women in the organisation or the increased visibility of the problem area. This result should be seen in the light of the agents' claims that there is a general perception among managers that there are no suitable, competent women to turn to.

30. If the programme has been gender-blind, however, sometimes a negative effect of visibility can occur. It depends on an inadequate perception of women's situation in the organisation. If there is no general understanding of why a training programme solely for women is not to be interpreted as an injustice to men, but as a way of dealing with a gender bias in the organisation, this type of programme will be difficult to defend in the long run.

Women's awareness and men's insights

31. It is obvious that training for women makes women more aware of their situation. Women acquire new knowledge in this area. A number of agents claim, however, that women's perceptions also change with respect to other women. Women learn to see other women, and other women's competence. They realise the importance of giving other women support, and of building networks with other women. Women who have previously been sceptical of the value of special development programmes for women often change their view.

32. Men are also affected and change their views as a result of mentoring programmes and other activities that integrate men in women's training. Men can become aware of a problem that they have never thought about before in relation to working life. As a result, they may also want to know more, and their behaviour and way of thinking is affected. Sometimes the issue itself has become important due to the attitude of the senior management, which also influences men's interest in the field.

A changed approach

33. Finally changed perceptions and attitudes in organisations are described as an important result of this work. Thinking in a different way than previously, often means that one also acts in a different way. The results to a large extent involve linking women's issues to the organisations activities. Realising that this is not a separate area from the rest of the organisation's activities, but is on the contrary integrated in most things; the managerial role, senior management, and business transactions.

Lessons to be drawn

34. The lessons to be drawn from the various programmes and projects described by the agents deal with the significance of the senior management and what is important to think of in the process of work.

35. Almost all agents drew attention to the importance of having the backing of the senior management when work was to be carried out in this field. The senior management sends signals down the organisation that this is important, which especially male managers take note of. It is also important to have access to the senior management in the course of the work, and not just at the beginning, is pointed out by several of the interviewed agents of change. Some argue that it is also necessary that senior management really believe in increasing the number of women in management positions, that their actions are based on conviction and not just lip service.

36. Lessons about what is important to think of in the work process take up a number of aspects. One of them is the role of the agent. That there is one person who follows the entire process is essential. The work must be respected, and be regarded as an area of knowledge. To achieve results there has to be human and financial resources.

37. Furthermore, a large proportion of the lessons described are about men. The fact that they are less centred on women depends on the fact that most of these agents have worked on these issues for a long time and have considerable knowledge of the field. Along with a large-scale and more conscious integration of the programmes in the organisations becoming a more frequent occurrence, men take a greater place in the work of the agents. Men lack knowledge and motivation for the issue. Men do not feel involved, and they do not understand the problem. Men choose other men, and most male top managers lack the experience of working with women on the same level. The private relations to women matter in the professional situation; *'Men who are married to career women, and men who have daughters are easier to work with. It is more difficult with men who have a housewife at home.'*

CONCLUSIONS

38. The findings underline the importance of regarding this area as a field of knowledge. To be able to achieve changes, a new way of thinking is required, both among women and men, not least among managers. General knowledge about the organisation is required on what kinds of problems there are. That it is an *organisational problem* that women's competence is not made use of and not a woman's problem. And that it is the senior managers who are responsible for ensuring that the use is made of the resources available in the organisation, not only the equality officer, who is instead to be regarded as a specific competence resource for the organisation.

39. More women are needed at managerial level because it involves both competence and power. The agents claim that there will be a better basis for decisions if women are included since to some extent women represent a competence based on experience. As a power resource women can also contribute to broader more representative solutions and decisions. Moreover, a number of agents see possibilities for the development of a different and better management with more women at the managerial level.

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ANNEX

THE BUSINESS LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

1. The Business Leadership Academy was founded in 1995 by three prominent business leaders in Sweden. The idea to create a forum where top managers could exchange experiences emerged when the founders participated in the committee of inquiry appointed by the Swedish government, referred to above (Wahl, 1995). The Business Leadership Academy was established to work with the development of organisation and leadership in the Swedish private sector. Leadership was characterised by the ability to identify, develop and utilise the competence and potential of both women and men. One of the goals was to increase the number of women in leading positions.
2. The Board of the Leadership Academy includes, in addition to its founders, top managers from the private sector. The Scientific Council, consisting of six acknowledged scientists in management-, organisation- and gender-research, is in direct contact with the Board and continually with the president of the Leadership Academy.
3. Companies are offered to become subscribers. The Leadership Academy supplies leading edge knowledge to managers by different means. A number of fora at different levels of management are set up with seminars, workshops and time for dialogue and reflection. The subscribing companies choose their own participants. The gender perspective is integrated in all seminars and other activities. Mixed groups of both women and men are always aimed at.
4. Some experiences and reflections around the first three years of the Business leadership academy will be presented as concluding remarks to the possibilities of creating conditions for women's access to top positions in organisations.