



PHOTO: ALEXANDER RUASFOLIO

Sweden strives to ensure that men and women enjoy the same rights – at school, in the workplace and in the home.

## GENDER EQUALITY:

# THE SWEDISH APPROACH TO FAIRNESS

Sweden ranks as one of the world's most gender-egalitarian countries, based on a firm belief that men and women should share power and influence equally. An extensive welfare system makes it easier for both sexes to balance work and family life. However, the Government recognises that there is still room for improvement in many areas.

Gender equality is one of the cornerstones of modern Swedish society. The aim of Sweden's gender equality policies is to ensure that women and men enjoy the same opportunities, rights and obligations in all areas of life.

The overarching principle is that everyone, regardless of gender, has the right to work and support themselves, to balance career and family life, and to live without the fear of abuse or violence.

Gender equality implies not only equal distribution between men and women in all domains of society. It is also about

the qualitative aspects, ensuring that the knowledge and experience of both men and women are used to promote progress in all aspects of society.

In the Global Gender Gap Report 2012, Sweden is named as a world leader in equality. The report, drawn up at the initiative of the World Economic Forum, measures equality in the areas of economics, politics, education and health. It can be read at: [www.weforum.org](http://www.weforum.org).

### Gender equality at school

Ideally, gender equality should reach and

guide all levels of the Swedish educational system. Its principles are therefore increasingly being incorporated into education in Swedish preschools.

The aim is to give children the same opportunities in life, regardless of their gender, by using teaching methods that allow each child to grow into a unique individual. The issue of gender equality is addressed continuously throughout elementary school to prepare students for further education.

Today, a greater proportion of women than men complete upper secondary

## WORKING FOR EQUALITY

### THE EQUALITY OMBUDSMAN

The Equality Ombudsman (*Diskrimineringsombudsmannen*, or *DO*) is a government agency that fights discrimination and protects equal rights and opportunities for everyone.

The Equality Ombudsman reviews situations concerning gender equality in the workplace, the school system and other areas. It is also responsible for ensuring that the law regarding parental leave is followed and that parents who go on leave are not adversely affected at work.

The Equality Ombudsman primarily oversees compliance with the Discrimination Act. This law prohibits discrimination related to gender, transgender identity or expression, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability or age.

[www.do.se](http://www.do.se)



PHOTO: NIKLAS LARSSON/TT

Both mothers and fathers in Sweden are entitled to paid parental leave.

### THE MINISTER FOR GENDER EQUALITY

In Sweden, the Minister for Children, the Elderly, and Gender Equality is ultimately responsible for gender equality issues. Åsa Regnér has held the post since September 2014.

Gender equality policy matters in Sweden are handled by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. However, all ministers are required to ensure that a gender equality perspective is mainstreamed into their ministries and their areas of responsibility.



PHOTO: KRISTIAN POHL/REGERINGSKANSLIET

Åsa Regnér, Sweden's Minister for Gender Equality.

- education in Sweden, which has come to attention as a reverse gender issue. Significantly more women than men also participate in adult education. Women comprise roughly 60 per cent of all students in undergraduate university studies and almost two-thirds of all degrees are awarded to women. Equal numbers of women and men now take part in post-graduate and doctoral studies.

#### Parental leave

In Sweden, parents are entitled to 480 days of parental leave when a child is born or adopted. This leave can be taken by the month, week, day or even by the hour. Women still take most of the days – in 2012, men took about 24 per cent of parental leave.

For 390 days, the maximum parental allowance is SEK 946 (EUR 105.0, USD 137.0) a day, as of 2013. For the remaining 90 days, the daily allowance is SEK 180. Sixty days of leave are allocated specifically to each parent, and cannot be transferred to the other. In addition, one of the parents of the new-born baby gets 10 extra days of leave in connection with the birth or 20 days if they are twins.

Parents who share the transferable leave allowance equally get a SEK 50 daily bonus for a maximum of 270 days.

Adopting parents are entitled to a total of 480 days between them from the day the child comes under their care. A single parent is entitled to the full 480 days. ■

## GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

The discussion in Sweden covers not only gender equality but also the gender neutrality of language. This was seen during 2012 in a lively debate over the gender-neutral personal pronoun "*hen*", a newly minted word adopted by some people as an alternative to the gender-specific "*hon*" and "*han*", she and he.

Advocates say *hen* avoids the need to refer only to one gender or to use the cumbersome inclusive form of he/she, while

also opening up the language for people who might not identify themselves as either male or female, or who wish to avoid referring to themselves as one sex or the other.

Critics argue that the word dilutes and damages the Swedish language and leads to confusion, particularly among children. *Hen* is being seen increasingly on Swedish websites and in print.

## LEGISLATION

### THE ABORTION ACT

Since 1975, women in Sweden have the legal right to an abortion during the first 18 weeks of pregnancy. This means that a woman can decide for herself whether to have an abortion through the 18th week of pregnancy without having to give a reason. After week 18, an abortion may be performed if there are special reasons for doing so, up to week 22. In such cases, an investigation is conducted before the National Board of Health decides whether to allow the abortion.

### THE ACT ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The Act on Violence against Women came into force in 1998. The law states that the violence and abuse to which a woman is subjected, for instance by a man in a close relationship, is assessed cumulatively. Each blow and/or instance of sexual and psychological degradation against the woman is taken into account. The maximum sentence for a gross violation of a woman's integrity is six years' imprisonment.

### PROHIBITING THE PURCHASE OF SEXUAL SERVICES

The way prostitution is viewed in society is directly connected to gender equality. The Act Prohibiting the Purchase of Sexual Services, introduced in 1999, made it illegal to buy sexual services in Sweden. As part of a reform of sexual crime legislation in 2005, the Act was repealed and the offence was incorporated instead into the general criminal code.

The idea is to target the purchaser rather than those selling sex. As a result, street prostitution has declined dramatically, as has acceptance of the purchase of sex among the general public. The Swedish policy in this field has also contributed significantly to change in other countries.



PHOTO: JOHNÉR

Sweden is one of the few countries to prohibit the purchase of sexual services.



Jönköping County governor Minoo Akhtarzand, one of many women leaders in the public sector. Mutewatch founder Mai-Li Hammargren is paving the way for women in the private sector.



PHOTO: CASPER HEDBERG/TTI: MUTEWATCH

## WOMEN AND MEN AT WORK

Sweden has come a long way in making sure that women and men are treated equally in the workplace. But in the Swedish private sector, the proportion of women in top positions remains weak.

Two main sections of the Discrimination Act deal with gender equality at work. First, there is the requirement that all employers must actively pursue specific goals to promote equality between men and women.

Second, the law prohibits discrimination and obliges employers to investigate and take measures against any harassment. Employers must not unfairly treat any employee or job applicant who is, has been or will be taking parental leave.

Pay differentials between men and women can largely be explained by differences in profession, sector, position, work experience and age. Some, however, cannot be explained this way and may be attributable to gender – these are called unjustified pay differentials. On average, women's monthly salaries are 94 per cent of men's when differences in choice of profession and sector are taken into account. Pay differentials are most pronounced in the private sector.

### Economic and political power

The Government's gender equality policy is twofold: to ensure power and resources are distributed fairly between the sexes, and to

create the conditions that give women and men the same power and opportunities.

In professional life, the proportion of women in top posts is increasing. In 2012, the share of women heading companies – private and public sector combined – was 36 per cent compared with 29 per cent in 2006. The majority of managers in municipal, county council and central government were women (64 per cent), but in listed companies, the representation of women remained weak, with only 4 per cent of board chairpersons and managing directors.

After the 2010 election, 45 per cent of the places in the Swedish parliament were taken by women, down from 47 per cent after the 2006 election. At present, 13 of the 24 Government ministers are women.

### Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming, a term coined by the United Nations in 1997, describes the incorporation of the gender equality perspective into the work of government agencies at all levels. The idea is that gender equality is not a separate, isolated

## HISTORY

**1250s** King Birger Jarl passes a law on violence against women prohibiting rape and abduction.

**1921** Women get the right to vote and run for office. The first five women to win seats in parliament are Kerstin Hesselgren, Elisabeth Tamm, Agda Östlund, Nelly Thüring and Bertha Wellin.

**1965** Sweden passes a law against rape in marriage.

**1972** Joint taxation of spouses is abolished in Sweden.

**1974** Sweden becomes the first country in the world to replace maternity leave with parental leave.

**1975** New abortion law comes into force.

**1980** Sweden, a constitutional monarchy, makes its Act of Succession gender-neutral.

**1998** The Act on Violence against Women is introduced.

**1999** The Act Prohibiting the Purchase of Sexual Services comes into effect.

**2002** Parental leave increased to 480 days, with each parent entitled to two months of non-transferable benefits.

**2005** New legislation on sexual crimes further strengthens the absolute right of every individual to sexual integrity and self-determination.

**2009** The Discrimination Act replaces seven separate anti-discrimination laws.

**2011** Stalking – repeated harassment – becomes an offence. One aim of the law is to further prevent male violence against women.

► issue but a continual process. To create equality, the concept of equality must be taken into account when resources are distributed, norms are created and decisions are taken.

In Sweden, gender mainstreaming is seen as the main strategy for achieving targets within equality policy. The portal [www.includegender.org](http://www.includegender.org) was created in 2009 to help this process, providing simple tools to make gender mainstreaming easier in practice.

In 2011, the Swedish Government decided to strengthen efforts within equality, creating a national platform to further gender mainstreaming at the municipal, regional and national levels. ■



PHOTO: CEOLIA LARSSON/IMAGEBANK SWEDEN.SE

Swedish law prohibits gender discrimination in the workplace.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In 2012, about 28,000 cases of violence against women were recorded in Sweden. Over the years, the number of reported cases has risen significantly as more women speak out. Legislation changes in the early 1980s removed the possibility of a woman withdrawing an allegation of violence once made; this was required to counter threats to women who lodged complaints.

Women who need help can turn to the Swedish Association of Women's Shelters ([www.kvinnojouren.se](http://www.kvinnojouren.se)), or the National Organisation for Women's and Young Women's Shelters ([www.roks.se](http://www.roks.se)). They can also ask for help from any of approximately 130 local women's shelters located throughout Sweden.

Other organisations that work with issues regarding violence against women include:

- The National Clearinghouse on Violence against Women, which promotes co-operation between agencies and organisations in contact with women exposed to violence. [www.operationkvinnofrid.nu](http://www.operationkvinnofrid.nu)
- The National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence Against Women, based at Uppsala University, has been tasked by the Government to raise awareness of male violence against women, honour-related violence and violence within same-sex relationships. It also works to improve and spread ways of assisting women victims of violence. [www.nck.uu.se](http://www.nck.uu.se)

## USEFUL LINKS

[www.allakvinnorshus.org](http://www.allakvinnorshus.org) All Women's House

[www.forsakringskassan.se](http://www.forsakringskassan.se) The Swedish Social Insurance Agency

[www.genus.se](http://www.genus.se) Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research

[www.government.se](http://www.government.se) Government and the Government Offices of Sweden

[www.kvinnofridslinjen.se](http://www.kvinnofridslinjen.se) Hotline for women subjected to threats, violence or sexual assault

[www.scb.se](http://www.scb.se) Statistics Sweden

[www.wombri.se](http://www.wombri.se) Women's Business Research Institute

SEK 1 (Swedish krona) =  
USD 0.15 or EUR 0.11



Copyright: Published by the Swedish Institute. Updated May 2015 FS 8.

All content is protected by Swedish copyright law. The text may be reproduced, transmitted, displayed, published or broadcast in any media with reference to sweden.se. However, no photographs or illustrations may be used.

The Swedish Institute (SI) is a public agency that promotes interest and confidence in Sweden around the world. SI seeks to establish co-operation and lasting relations with other countries through strategic communication and exchange in the fields of culture, education, science and business.

Further information about Sweden: sweden.se, the Swedish embassy or consulate in your country, or the Swedish Institute, Box 7434, SE-103 91 Stockholm, Sweden. Phone: +46 8 453 78 00; e-mail: [si@si.se](mailto:si@si.se) [www.si.se](http://www.si.se) [www.swedenbookshop.com](http://www.swedenbookshop.com) [www.swedenabroad.com](http://www.swedenabroad.com)