

Women in Swedish Universities — A Major “Minority” of Growing Importance

by Jill Falk

Short Academic History

Until the 19th century, the view of women in Sweden was steeped in medieval laws. A woman was subordinated to a man — either her father, brother, husband or son. A new law in 1858 gave unmarried women over 25 years of age the right — after application — to attain their majority, but if they married, they were again declared incapable of managing their own affairs. It was not until 1921 that married women reached their majority, the same year as universal and equal suffrage was introduced in Sweden.

Not surprisingly the history of Swedish women in higher education is rather short, little more than a hundred years old. Women’s access to public institutions for higher education and research is closely linked to the gradual disintegration of the guild system and to the expansion of the public sector.¹ In 1870 women were allowed to pass the *studentexamen* (matriculation examination) after having been privately coached, and in 1873, they were given the right to study for academic degrees, with the exception of theological and higher law degrees. It took another 50 years before women were considered qualified to apply for public positions and employed as men were. The principle of equal pay was introduced in 1947. A table will illustrate this development:

- 1845 Equal right of inheritance for men and women.
- 1858 Unmarried women over the age of 25 can attain their majority after application, but if they marry, they again lose the right to manage their own affairs.
- 1859 Women allowed to take certain kinds of teaching posts (mostly in remote villages).
- 1864 Men lose their legal right to flog their wives(!)
- 1870 Women were allowed to pass matriculation examination after having been privately instructed.

- 1873 Women allowed to study for academic degrees with the exception of Theology and Lic. in Laws.
- 1874 Unmarried women attain their majority at the age of 21. Universal and equal suffrage is introduced in Sweden. First woman elected to the Swedish Parliament (Kerstin Haselgren).
- 1925 Women allowed to enter public service with exception of positions as judge (1933), minister of religion (1958) and member of the armed forces (1983).
- 1927 Public grammar schools opened to girls.
- 1937 Maternity allowance introduced.
- 1947 The principle of equal pay introduced. Family allowance introduced. First women to be a member of cabinet (Karin Kock).
- 1950 Both parents become guardians of their children.
- 1969 New curriculums are introduced for nine-year compulsory school as well as for comprehensive upper secondary school. School is expected to promote equality between sexes.
- 1971 Separate taxation for man and wife introduced.
- 1974 Parental insurance introduced.
- 1975 The UN International Decade of Women begins. New law on abortion introduced.
- 1976 The first Ordinance on equal opportunities concerning the public sector.
- 1980 Act on Equality between Women and Men at Work comes into force and the Office of *JämO* (National E.O. Ombudsman) established. Testing of spouse’s means when applying for study support repealed. New order of succession to the Swedish throne introduced: the

first born son or daughter inherits.

- 1984 A collective agreement on equality is made between the State as employer and the trade unions.

Sex Discrimination From the Start

The first university in Sweden was founded in Uppsala in 1477. In 1668 another one was inaugurated in Lund, located there to “swedify” the southern area of the country, just conquered after a war with Denmark. University colleges in Stockholm and Gothenburg were made into universities in the 1950s, and in the 1960s the northern region was to get its share of higher education; a university was established in Umeå. The youngest university in Sweden is in Linköping. All six universities are primarily financed by the State, but when it comes to research considerable amounts of money are contributed by sectoral agencies, i.e. research councils and external funds. Other funds, such as private donations, amount to little more than 2% of the total budget.

In the earlier days, the number of students was modest and the percentage of women very small. Women professors were long unheard of, and there is a sad story about a woman Doctor of Laws and “docent” in Civil Law in Uppsala, Elsa Eschelsson, who found herself so aggressively opposed by her male colleagues and superiors that she finally, in 1911, committed suicide. The story of her life has been made into a play which will be released on Swedish television in spring, 1988.

It seems as if the woman student’s entrance also meant a significant change of spirit in the university setting, probably the most radical in the history of the academic mentality.²

At the beginning of the 1960s, when I myself was a young law student in Lund, the number of students was still small. The percentage of women varied consid-

erably, from approximately 5% in technical subjects to 20% in law, medicine and natural sciences and nearly 60% in humanities and social sciences. Only 15% of the very moderate number of registered post-graduate students, 3,500 in all of Sweden, were women. Clearly the dispersion of males and females at the universities reflected the condition of the Swedish school system. Statistics of graduation from senior high school in 1962 show that only 30% of the graduates from science programs were girls, and only 28% of the graduates from the classics programs were boys. I do not believe this was considered remarkable then; according to the general opinion of women's role in higher education at the time, it was quite natural. To a great extent, girls were still expected to go to university mainly to find a husband and then stay home and rear children.

Transformation of the Educational System

Towards the end of the 1960s, there was a tremendous increase in student enrollment in Sweden as well as in other parts of the world. The rate of increase in Sweden was a record for Western Europe. Reform strategies focused on efficiency, and measures were taken to reduce the number of dropouts and promote the flow of students through higher education. A 1969 reform brought about fixed lines of study, intake restrictions in certain programs, and a more rigid organization of studies in the formerly unrestricted faculties of Arts and Sciences.³

In 1977 another far-reaching reform of the higher education system took place. A broader concept of higher education was introduced, and three different subsectors were integrated in the new *högskola* (the institutions of higher education):

- the traditional university sector,
- vocational institutions with fairly close university links, e.g., teacher training colleges and schools of social work,
- vocational institutions with no or very weak connections to university education, e.g., nursing schools and preschool training colleges.

Now, according to statistics, there are more women than men enrolling at the undergraduate level in Swedish higher education. The women's share is about 61% and they are particularly well represented

in the age groups 18-24 and 40-45. But again, sex distribution between the different educational sectors — as well as within them — is skewed: women represent 93% of the enrollment in nursing and health care education, 79% in various types of teacher education, and only 18% in the technical sector.⁴ Out of a total of approximately 175,000 (1985/86) students there were 12,400 in post-graduate studies; one third of them were women.

Women's Perspective

The scarcity of women in post-graduate studies and in research has been criticized by the governments's Equality Commission. In 1983 a report on the matter was published under the title "If Half the Part Were Women." Besides statistical and institutional facts and data, the report also included reflections by 15 women researchers from different research fields on the question "What would happen in your research fields, if half of the researchers were women?" The report mirrors a new awareness among Swedish feminists and policy makers about the particularities of women's knowledge. There is a "women's perspective" in most research fields which has often been overlooked. In order to obtain real equality and to be able to change the sex structure in society, there has to be a combination of the "male" concept of culture — the one we know about — and women's knowledge. Proposals ranging from changes in the curriculum of preschool training colleges to new research appointments at universities are advocated.⁵

Too Few Women in Research

In spite of encouragement from government authorities, it is still difficult to recruit more women to research work and post-graduate studies. Many post-graduate students, women as well as men, back out before they reach their doctor's degree, and of those who successfully complete their education, only an average of 20% are women. They are also generally older than their male counterparts. There are several reasons for this state of things; let me mention a few.

Many of those who break off their studies are dissatisfied with the guidance they have received — or with not having had any guidance at all. Advisorship can be a

big problem in some disciplines, especially in the faculties of humanities and social sciences, due to the large number of post-graduate students in relation to the number of advisors. Both men and women doing post-graduate studies are usually in great need of support and guidance, but women need more because they have more obstacles to overcome. Combined with the academic pressure, they are often left out and not taken seriously in the male-dominated world of post-graduate studies and research.

Another important motive for post-graduate students leaving their studies is their economic situation. According to a fairly recent report, the median income for post-graduate students in Sweden is low — about half the basic salary of an industrial worker. As a consequence, many carry out their studies part-time, with recurring interruptions for paid jobs — and a subsequent prolongation of study time. For women post-graduate students, who usually have the main responsibility for children and housework, and who therefore generally have fewer hours a day to devote to research and studies, the economic situation often becomes the decisive reason for discontinuing. Besides, today there are no guarantees that the acquired degree will lead to a well paid job.

The typical woman post-graduate student begins her studies later than her male colleague. She is often over 30 years old when she starts and consequently tends to be older than her male colleagues upon the completion of her doctorate and thus has less chance in competing with men for higher positions.

Numerous surveys have shown that many women post-graduate students consider it difficult to combine studies with family life. Most of them are married or live with someone, often a university student or teacher, and many have children. This is the true difference between women and men students: the typical male post-graduate student is the only one in his family engaged in an academic career, while the typical woman post-graduate is one of two in a two-career family, with all the competition and conflicts inherent in such a situation.⁶

Hierarchy in the Administration

Until now, very few women have been promoted to key positions as professors

and researchers in Swedish universities and research institutes (Figure 1). This means a lack of role-models not only for the women post-graduate students but also for the undergraduates when they ponder their future career choices.

As Figure 1 shows, the university organization in Sweden is characterized by a strong, hierarchic structure, and the tendency is obvious: the higher up in the hierarchy, the fewer women. This also goes for the administration, where the managerial positions seem to be primarily reserved for men. Out of 33 heads of administration at universities and university colleges only three are women. Women administrators are allowed to reach middle-management level, very few are promoted, and the secretarial staff is almost invariably female. The technical personnel is fairly evenly divided into male research engineers and female laboratory assistants and medical technicians. 90% of the cleaning staff are women.

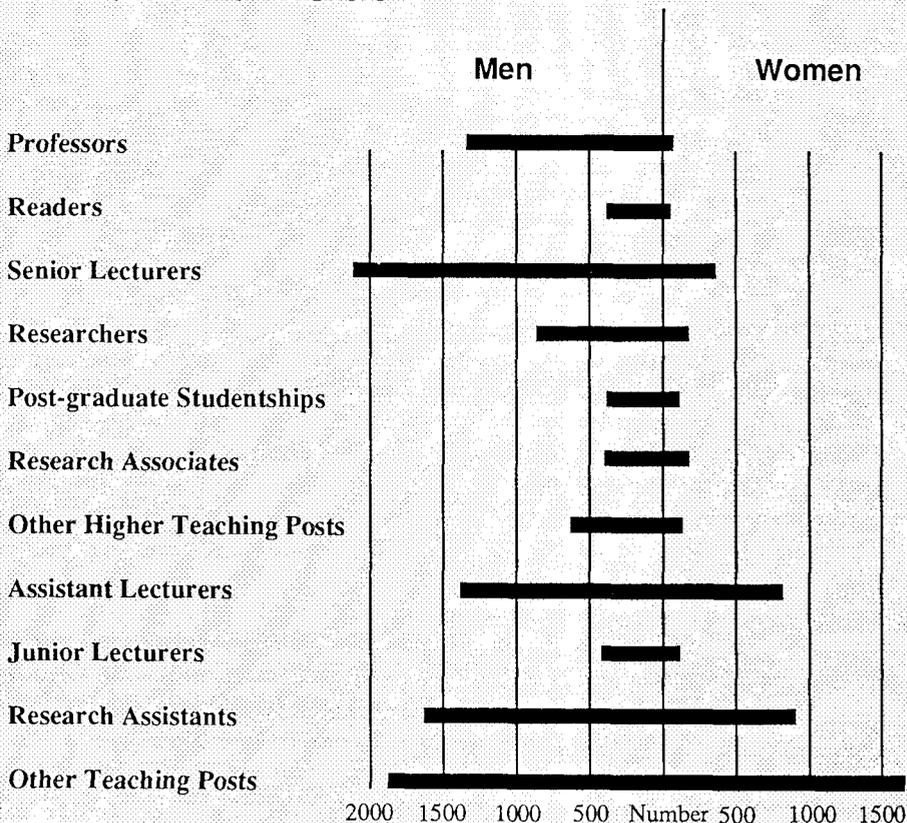
Forum Groups — a Success

During the 1960s, an animated public discussion on sex roles started in Sweden, and to a great extent it was based upon works by pioneers in research on women's history. The first university courses with a feminist angle started in Gothenburg and Uppsala. Gradually new, inter-disciplinary courses were created at the other universities and are attended by a large number of women post-graduate students. The development of the women's movement in North America during the 1970s was most inspiring to many women writers, artists, students and researchers in Sweden and attention was called to the discrimination against women at the universities concurrently with the growth of women's research.

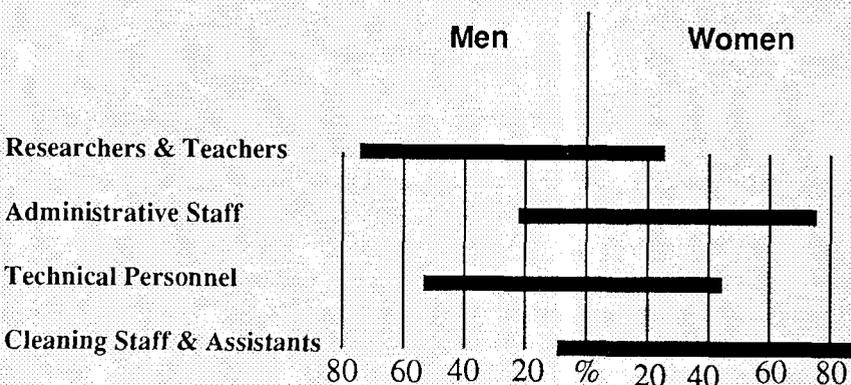
The first organization for women post-graduate students was founded in 1978 in Lund, "The Forum for Women Researchers and Women's Research" and soon equivalent organizations were established at other universities. After 10 years they have now become a permanent and integral part of the university structure. There are sister organizations in the other Scandinavian countries, and every year joint research meetings and conferences are held. International cooperation with other countries has also developed and the forums frequently receive foreign guest re-

Figure 1
Personnel at Swedish Universities and University Colleges (1986)

Researchers and Teachers



Main Categories of Personnel



Source: The Swedish Central Bureau of Statistics (SCB)

searchers and guest lecturers.

The Magazine of Women's Research was started in 1980, also in Lund. It comes out on special themes four times a year and is an important voice for women researchers.

Legislation has Little Effect

A major safeguard against discrimination on the basis of sex is found in the Instrument of Government, which forms part of the Swedish Constitution. It also endorses efforts to ensure that the conditions under which women and men live are equivalent.

An important feature of Swedish family law is to put women and men on an equal footing in marriage, and to protect the financially weaker party in the event of divorce or death. The objective of certain other statutes such as the *Code Relating to Parents, Guardianship and Children*, the *Child Care Leave Act* and certain parts of the *National Insurance Act*, is to lay the foundation for shared responsibility for the home and children. But, as indicated above, it does not always function that way in real life.

During the last 25 years the number of women taking employment in Sweden has increased drastically and in 1986, 83% of all women aged 20-64 were gainfully employed, as compared to 90% of the men. Due to heavy taxation in Sweden it is almost necessary to have two-income families. The availability of public, subsidized care facilities for children and the elderly, and an improved public transport system are other important factors underlying the high female employment participation rate in Sweden.

However, this process has also had a serious drawback — the strict sex-segregation of the labour market. The woman's occupational choice has become very much an extension of the traditional role of women, i.e. care and service occupations in both the private and public sectors, occupations which traditionally are less well paid and have low status. The majority of men are found in the manufacturing sector. Moreover, women and men have different hours of work. Due to their double responsibilities at home and at work, almost half of the gainfully employed women work part-time compared to 6% of the men. This counts for much of the differences between the sexes in in-

comes and old-age pensions.

In 1980 a new law, the *Act on Equality Between Women and Men at Work*, came into force. It is copied, to a certain extent, from the American *Equal Opportunities Act*. One part of the Swedish Act contains rules prohibiting an employer from discriminating against a person because of his or her sex, and another part makes it incumbent on an employer to take active measures to promote equality at work. The rules on active measures have been replaced and supplemented by collective agreements between trade union and employer organizations at the national confederation level. Such an agreement was made for the public sector in 1984, and at the same time an ordinance was passed on equality in the public job market. All of this is supposed to put pressure on employers to work actively for equalization between women and men within their fields of responsibility. Unfortunately there are many ways to avoid this.

The First Academic Case is Lost

The national office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsman was set up at the same time as the *Equal Opportunities Act* was introduced. During the first eight years of its existence the office has been held by a qualified woman judge and she has worked actively to assist people who claim to have been victims of sex discrimination, e.g., by taking their cases to the Labour Court, a tribunal which deals with labour market disputes. Unfortunately, she was not successful in the only case, so far, concerning an academic position (a research associate in business economics at the University of Gothenburg). The woman applicant requested that her qualifications be reviewed by the appointing committee, and, assisted by the Ombudsman, she sued the university for damages because of discrimination on the grounds of sex. She lost on both levels. The subject experts consulted by the appointing committee and by the E.O. Ombudsman, were divided in their opinion of the applicant's scientific proficiency, and this was what finally downed her. The majority of experts supported her male opponents, and their view of scientific skill could not be discounted. I am not in a position to question the outcome of this case, but many years' experience in handling aca-

demical affairs has convinced me that the idea of pure objectivity is a chimaera. Deliberately or unintentionally, the experts on appointing committees can always bend their assessment of the applicant's qualifications to suit their own preferences, and the previously mentioned "women's perspective" is far from being considered a credit in the competition for academic posts.

Women on the Move

If the picture I have given of the situation of women in Swedish universities seems dark, this is not the whole truth. I have already mentioned the forum groups, and other networks for the support of women being established within the universities as well as in other social strata in Sweden. We have local committees dealing with equal opportunities for women and men in working life at most public authorities in Sweden, some of them very active. Through continuous information and education, the civil servants will, hopefully, realize the importance of equal opportunities for women and men at work as well as at home.

On a travel grant from the Bicentennial Swedish-American Exchange Fund and from Umeå University, I had the privilege last year of going on a study tour to some universities and organizations in the United States — and to York University in Toronto! Primarily I wanted to find out if there are any short cuts or other ways to speed up the procedure of introducing more women into top management posts and involving them in the decision and policy making process. Although I cannot claim to have found any ingenious examples of what I was looking for, my trip was very rewarding in many ways. During six weeks of travel I met and talked to about 120 people; half of these conversations were regular interviews or heart-to-heart talks on equal opportunities and matters of personal importance. It will take some time to absorb all the material I gathered, but I would like to summarize some of my observations.

American and Canadian universities are way ahead of Sweden with regard to education in "women's studies." We do not have full programs at the undergraduate or post-graduate levels, only occasional inter-disciplinary courses, mostly offered under the auspices of the Forum organiza-

tions.

We have none of the local affirmative action officers in Sweden that I encountered in North America. On the other hand, Swedish university employees belong to a union of some kind to a much greater extent than in North America, and it is the responsibility of the unions to assist their members in matters of sex discrimination. However, I cannot say that they are very attentive.

The Office of Women in Higher Education, a unit at the American Council on Education in Washington, D.C., plays a very important role in seeking out and training women fit to be leaders, and in backing in various ways those who are already in leadership positions. This is something I think we need more of in Sweden.

The hierarchical structure of the universities seems to be very much the same in

the US and Canada as in Sweden, and the leading positions are equally male-dominated in all three countries. Legislation seems to be as ineffective, and there are no real short cuts to improve the conditions and positions of women. We have to go on conducting surveys and analyses, making the obvious visible, trying to raise the consciousness of both women and men as to the importance of equality between the sexes. A world where women and men work together, side by side, and under a mutual sense of responsibility must be a better world than the one we have today.

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¹Gunilla Övergaard, *Kvinnor och kvinnoperspektiv i högskolans utbildning och forskning*. (Women and Women's Perspective in Education and Research at Universities and University Colleges). Umeå, Kvinnoforskningsseminariets skriftserie nummer 1, 1986, p. 1.

²Carl Fehrman, *Lärdomens Lund* (Lund, a City of Learning). Malmö, Liber Förlag, 1984, p. 206.

³Inga Elgqvist-Saltzman, "Rational Efficiency and Human Sensibility in Educational Reform: A Swedish Case Study in an Australian Framework," in *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 29, 123-140, 1985, p. 126.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁶Marianne Carlsson, "Women Graduate Students and Research on Women." Stockholm, The Swedish Institute, *Current Sweden*, No. 340, 1985, p.4.

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