

The Swedish approach to fairness

Gender equality is one of the cornerstones of 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.

Equal rights

Sweden's 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 2006, the World Economic Forum introduced its annual Global Gender Gap Report, which measures equality in the areas of economics, politics, education and health. Since the report's inception, Sweden has never finished lower than fifth in the ranking.

Gender equality at school

Gender equality is strongly emphasised in the Education Act, the law that governs all education in Sweden. It states that gender equality should reach and guide all levels of the Swedish educational system. ►

In Sweden, fathers are as entitled to paid parental leave as mothers.



Photo: Magnus Liam Karlsson/imagebank-sweden.se



Photo: Ann-Sofi Rosenkvist/Imagebank sweden.se

The Education Act aims for gender equality in all of Sweden's schools.

The principles are increasingly being incorporated into education from pre-school level onwards, with the aim of giving children the same opportunities in life, regardless of their gender, by using teaching methods that counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles.

Today, girls generally have better grades in Swedish schools than boys. Girls also perform better in national tests, and a greater proportion of girls complete upper secondary education.

Whereas a few decades ago, the university realm was dominated by men, today nearly two-thirds of all university degrees in Sweden are awarded to women.

These developments, similar to those of many other countries, have come to attention as a reverse gender problem.

However, while equal numbers of women and men in Sweden take part in postgraduate and doctoral studies, only around 30 per cent of the country's professors are women.

Parental leave

An extensive welfare system that promotes a healthy work-life balance has been an important factor in making Sweden a gender-egalitarian leader.

Parents are entitled to share 480 days of parental leave when a child is born or adopted (a single parent is entitled to the full 480 days). This leave can be taken by the month, week, day or even by the hour. Women still use most of the days, with men taking around 30 per cent of the parental leave on average.

For 390 days, parents are entitled to nearly 80 per cent of their pay, with salaries capped at approximately SEK 39,400. (EUR3,713, USD 4,022) The remaining 90 days are paid at a flat daily rate.

For children born 2016 or later, 90 days of leave are allocated specifically to each parent. Should one of the parents decide not to take them, the days cannot be transferred to the other parent.

A few milestones

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

1845 Equal inheritance rights for women and men are introduced.

1919 Universal suffrage is formally extended to women.

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.

1989 Sweden's last professional monopolies are broken as women are allowed to become fighter pilots and submarine personnel in the military.

1998 The Act on Violence against Women is introduced.

1999 Sweden makes it illegal to buy sex.

2002 Parental leave is 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.

2014 Sweden, as the world's first country, launches a feminist foreign policy. A gender perspective is systematically integrated into Sweden's foreign policy agenda.

2016 The number of days of non-transferable parental leave is increased, from 60 to 90 days.

2018 The Swedish Gender Equality Agency is established. A new legislation on sexual crimes, based on consent, is adopted.

A female archbishop

For centuries, the role of archbishop has been held by men. In 2013, Sweden became one of few countries to break the trend when Antje Jackelén was elected by the Church of Sweden as its first female archbishop. Jackelén formally became Archbishop of Uppsala in June 2014 and therefore Primate of the Church of Sweden. German-born Jackelén was ordained priest in Sweden in 1980. She received her doctorate from Lund University in 1999 and was bishop in Lund diocese before moving on to her current position.

Since 1960, women have been ordained as priests within the Church of Sweden. Its national decision body, the Church Assembly, has 121 women and 130 men on its 2018–2021 board.



Photo: Jan Norden/Kon/CC BY 3.0

Archbishop Antje Jackelén.

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 pay differences remain, and in the Swedish private sector the proportion of women in top positions remains weak.



Photo: Anders Löwdin/Sveriges riksdag

Women are highly represented in Swedish politics, but Sweden has yet to see a woman prime minister.

Prohibiting discrimination

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.

Also, employers must not unfairly treat any employee or job applicant who is, has been or will be taking parental leave.

The Swedish government strives to ensure that power and resources are distributed fairly between the sexes, and to create the conditions that give women and men the same power and opportunities.

Economic power

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.

In Statistics Sweden's bi-annual report on gender equality from 2020, women's monthly salaries in Sweden were around 89 per cent of men's, or around 95 per cent when differences in choice of profession and sector were taken into account.

Across all sectors, the report had 38.8 per cent of mid- to high-level managers in Sweden

as women. They have traditionally had stronger representation in the public sector. Among public agencies whose director is appointed by the government, 104 were headed by women and 95 by men. Similarly, 54 per cent of chairpersons of wholly or partially state-owned companies were women.

In the private sphere, only 10 per cent of the companies listed on the Stockholm Stock Exchange had women chairpersons, with 35 per cent of board members being women.

Political power

Sweden has a high representation of women in politics, but has yet to see a woman prime minister. After the 2018 election, 161 of the 349 seats in the Riksdag – the Swedish parliament – were taken by women, 188 by men.

For the last couple of decades the government has followed an unwritten principle of aiming for a 50/50 distribution between men and women. In October 2020, there were 12 women and 11 men in Sweden's sitting government.

Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming refers to the gender equality perspective being incorporated into the work of government agencies at all levels. The idea is that gender equality is not a separate, isolated issue but a continuous process. To create equality, the concept of equality ►

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 and Welfare 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 each blow and/or instance of sexual and psychological degradation against a woman is taken into account. The maximum sentence for a gross violation of a woman's integrity is six years' imprisonment.

Targeting the sex buyer

In 1999, Sweden introduced its Act Prohibiting the Purchase of Sexual Services, the first of its kind. The act made it illegal to buy sexual services in Sweden – along with pimping, which was already forbidden – without punishing persons in prostitution. In 2005, the offence was incorporated into the general criminal code. Sweden's legal approach of targeting the purchasers rather than those in prostitution has since been adopted by Iceland, Norway, Ireland, Northern Ireland, France and Canada.

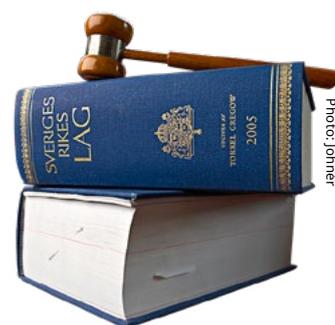


Photo: Johneri

Swedish law prohibits gender discrimination in the workplace.

must be considered when resources are distributed, norms are created, and decisions are taken.

Gender mainstreaming – a term first coined by the UN – was introduced as a working method in Sweden during the 1990s and has become a cornerstone in the government strategy for achieving targets within equality policy.

In 2018, the government established the Swedish Gender Equality Agency 'to contribute towards the effective, structured and cohesive implementation of gender equality policy'. The government's Gender Mainstreaming in Government Agencies programme currently includes nearly 60 Swedish agencies.

Violence against women

Around 75,000 women in Sweden experience some form of partner violence each year, the National Board of Health and Welfare estimates.

According to statistics by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 28,400 cases of violence against women were recorded in the country for 2019, 8,550 of which were reports of intimate partner violence.

Over the years, the number of reported cases in Sweden has risen significantly as more women speak out. Legislation was changed in the early 1980s so that a woman could not withdraw an allegation of violence once made; this was required to counter threats to women who reported violence.

Women who need help can turn to any of over 200 local women's shelters in Sweden. Most shelters are connected to either or both of two major national organisations, the Swedish Association of Women's Shelters, Unizon, or the National Organisation for Women's and Young Women's Shelters, Roks.

www.unizon.se
www.roks.se

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

- The National Clearinghouse on Violence against Women promotes co-operation between agencies and organisations in contact with women exposed to violence.

www.operationkvinnofrid.se

- 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

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, disability, age, religion or other belief.



Photo: Sofia Sabel/imagobank.sweden.se

Preventing work discrimination – one of the Equality Ombudsman's tasks.

Useful links

www.do.se
www.forsakringskassan.se
www.genus.se
www.government.se
www.kvinnofridslinjen.se
www.scb.se
www.weforum.org

The Equality Ombudsman
The Swedish Social Insurance Agency
Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research
Government and the Government Offices of Sweden
Hotline for women subjected to threats, violence or sexual assault
Statistics Sweden
World Economic Forum

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