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# Gender equality and liberal individualism: A critical reading of economist discourse in Sweden



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## KEYWORDS

Gender;  
Top management;  
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Ideology

**Summary** Although Sweden is considered egalitarian, very few women hold top corporate positions. The present study used critical discourse analysis to examine texts by the economist [Henrekson \(2004\)](#), contrasted with another economist [Boschini \(2004\)](#), within a Swedish Centre for Business and Policy Studies project designed to increase the number of women in top corporate positions. Contradictions appeared between Henrekson's ideological stance adhering to liberal individualism, and the implied, normative meaning of gender. Individual men lack agency regarding household and family, while individual women are positioned with agency and thus accountability. Traditional gender constructions and the removal of male agency may undermine the realization of proposed measures, and should be questioned if gender equality in top corporate positions is to be realized.

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## Introduction

Sweden represents an interesting paradox in regards to egalitarian matters. It is considered one of the most egalitarian countries in the world, with strong norms about gender equality, and repeatedly ranks favourably and near the top of various measures of gender equality (e.g., [Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2012](#)). There is a higher educational attainment for women than men, extensive legal and financial support surrounding parental leave for both women and men, and women's labour force participation is almost as high as that of men. Still, many more women work part-time, and the labour

market is highly segregated into typically male and female work-sectors ([Statistics Sweden, 2012](#)). Women are under-represented as managers in both the public and private sector, that is, there are higher proportions of female employees than managers in both sectors. Currently, women represent 64% of the managers in the public sector and 28% in the private sector ([Statistics Sweden, 2012](#)). International comparisons concerning such statistics must be interpreted with caution. However, as evidenced by Swedish women's representation in the workplace, it is possible to discern that Sweden has not fulfilled its own aspirations to reduce gender segregation in the labour market more generally, and of closing the gender gap in workplace authority more specifically (e.g., [Bridges, 2003](#); [Franco, 2007](#)). This lack of progress may be viewed as a paradox considering the country's strong emphasis on gender equality, with laws and regulations governing equality in many aspects of society, including for

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example laws stipulating gender equality plans for employers (Equality Ombudsman, 2011, see also Linghag, 2009).

The present study analyzed texts from a project by the Swedish Centre for Business and Policy Studies (SNS). The project was entitled *More women in leadership posts in business and industry* and was conducted during the years 2001–2004. SNS presents itself as “a non-partisan and independent non-profit organization that contributes to decision makers in politics, public administration and business being able to make well-informed decisions based on science and factual analysis” (SNS, 2013). Research, meetings and the publication of books are their main channels in pursuing this aim. The organization has a governing board of trustees, with trustees who are leading decision makers in business and public administration. SNS currently (2013) has 9500 members, including company and organization members as well as individual members. The aim of the SNS project was to work towards greater diversity and more women in leading positions in business and industry, for example by advocating for more female candidates in the appointment of board members (SNS, 2004). There were numerous conferences and seminars, with studies involving practitioners as well as researchers, most of which attracted considerable media attention (e.g., Aronsson, 2002; Thorngren, 2001). As the SNS project was coming to an end, its impact was described in positive terms (e.g., Fagerfjäll, 2003), but at that time, evidence of project related increases in the number of women in management positions could only be speculated on. Two years later, the organization’s follow up of the project revealed that the number of women in management had decreased (Renstig, 2006). The measurable positive impact of the SNS project still remains to be seen ten years later (see e.g., Allbright, 2013; Fristedt, Larsson, & Sundqvist, 2012). For example, executive search processes still appear to exclude women and reproduce male dominance in top management (see Tienari, Meriläinen, Holgersson, & Bendl, 2013), even though an improved recruitment process was one of SNS project’s aims (SNS, 2004). One may ask why the proposed actions had little to no apparent effect. The present study takes a critical discursive stance, and aimed at unfolding the discourse regarding women and leadership/management in a part of the SNS project, in order to point at its contribution to maintaining the status quo, that is, the dearth of women in top corporate positions.

## Theoretical background

Critical discourse analysis is part of the broader field of social constructionism and poststructuralist studies. Social categories such as gender are created, recreated and challenged in social interactions and practices, where discourse is seen as an important social practice. Although meanings are flexible and unstable, dominant discourses most often set the framework for what is considered truth, knowledge and appropriate behaviour, thereby perpetuating a particular social order including its uses of power (both discursive and non-discursive, see e.g., Fairclough, 1992; Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999). Ideology is seen as discourses that categorize the world in certain ways and thus legitimize and maintain a particular social order (Fairclough, 2003). In a critical discourse analysis, presuppositions, categorisations and other forms of discursive work are scrutinized, with particular

emphasis on unequal power relations contributing to which discursive constructions are construed as legitimate. Studying gender within this framework I would consider a post-structuralist/postmodern feminist endeavour (see Calas & Smircich, 2006). As such, my goal as it relates to the present study is not only to reveal what discourses concerning gender, leadership/management and organization are normalized and legitimized, but also to challenge these dominant and sometimes institutionalized interpretations (for a further discussion, see Jansson, 2010). Thus, the aim was to deconstruct the economists’ discourse as well as to denaturalise presuppositions, gender constructions and possible subject positions within this discourse (Calas & Smircich, 2006; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

## Research background

The masculinity and male dominance of organizations was historically taken for granted, but has been repeatedly challenged by feminist scholars (see e.g., Acker, 1990; Calas & Smircich, 2006; Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Hearn et al., 2012). However, the struggle to reformulate assumptions and organizational procedures continues (e.g., Dick & Nadin, 2006). In Sweden, just as in many other countries, leadership is still characterized as a masculine endeavour (e.g., Holgersson, 2003; SOU, 2003:16; Wahl, 1997). The masculine norm of leadership shapes the identity constructions and self-presentations of women managers differently from those of men, as women are not considered typical for such positions (see Fogelberg Eriksson, 2005; Pini, 2005). It also frequently means that women and women’s experiences are marginalized or made invisible (Fogelberg Eriksson, 2005; Holgersson, 2003; Pettersson, 2002), even though alternative discourses and practices challenging a traditional gender order concurrently take place (e.g., Linghag, 2009).

As a case in point, consider that an often-debated action is the introduction of gender quotas for company boards. In a discourse analysis of Swedish and Finnish media texts concerning this action, Tienari, Holgersson, Meriläinen, & Höök (2009) revealed how gender equality and competence were both deemed important, but most often ended up in opposition to each other. Letting the market decide should automatically render the most competent people, but such a practice has been shown to exclude women. This type of discourse, common within a market or corporate discourse, is based on assumptions of the independent, rational and goal-seeking individual, which is one of the central tenets of most types of liberal discourse (e.g., Parchev, 2008). However, what is concealed in this individualistic, meritocratic and superficially gender-neutral discourse is the gendered nature of this individual – he is most often assumed to be a man (e.g., Calas & Smircich, 2006; Tienari et al., 2009).

Many studies have revealed how people use discourse to appear non-prejudiced and in favour of equality, while at the same time displaying prejudice. Wetherell, Stiven, and Potter (1987) coined the expression *unequal egalitarianism* to describe such a phenomenon among university students discussing gender and employment opportunities. Riley (2002) unveiled a discourse where male professionals combined support for egalitarian employment practices with the maintenance of androcentrism, and Mählck (2004) showed how gender inequality was reified at Swedish universities within a

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