

Understanding the Experiences of Professional Women Leaders Living and Working in Sweden

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Elizabeth R. Johnson¹ and Katherine A. Tunheim²

Abstract

The Problem.

Women working across the globe have struggled to achieve positions of leadership while also taking parental leave, accessing affordable child care, and maintaining work–life balance. Alternate models are needed, in particular those relevant to the development and retention of women in the workplace.

The Solution.

Scandinavia is leading the world in gender equality (World Economic Forum). Of these progressive Nordic countries, the United Nations Commission has identified Sweden as one of the best countries in the world for women to live and work (World Economic Forum). The purpose of this article is to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of professional women leaders living and working in Sweden.

The Stakeholders.

With implications for employee retention and pay equity, this research may be useful for human resource development professionals, leadership developers, and educators. It may also be informative to women across the globe, hoping to learn how other countries treat and support their female and male employees, especially during parental leaves.

Keywords

women's leadership development, Sweden, parental leave, gender equality, worldview

Scandinavia is leading the world in gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2014[Global Gender Gap Report]). Of these progressive Nordic countries, the United Nations Commission has identified Sweden as one of the top five countries in the

¹Deloitte Tax, LLP, New York, NY, USA

²Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, MN, USA

Corresponding Author:

Elizabeth R. Johnson, Consultant, Deloitte Tax, LLP, New York, NY, USA.

Email: elijohnson@deloitte.com

world for women to live and work (World Economic Forum, 2014). Sweden is a compelling case study in the transformative power of gender equity in the lives of women. Over the past 20 years, Sweden has experienced a rapid increase in labor force participation (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). A variety of current literature examines this high rate of female workforce participation and whether Swedish culture is more susceptible to fostering female leaders due to the vital role egalitarian ideology plays in everyday life.

Equal employment opportunities, access to education and vocational training, motherhood, and family are central to the lives of women in Sweden. In the past, these components have prevented women from staying in the labor force and pursuing managerial or leadership roles. In recent years, however, Sweden's political and legislative strategies have succeeded, in many ways, in making it easier for women to combine both work and family life (Thomas & Hildingsson, 2009). A publicly subsidized network of day-care centers, labor union contracts guaranteeing women's equal employment opportunities, a school curriculum based on the principle of equality between the sexes, and programs that give employers financial incentive to train and hire women in nontraditional occupations have all played a large part in this national shift (Haas & Hwang, 1999). More than simply retaining women in the workforce, this legislation also addresses Sweden's parental leave policy and, as a result, fosters gender equity at home and increases men's domestic involvement (Thomas & Hildingsson, 2009). Consequently, more women are entering the managerial pipeline and accessing leadership roles that would have been out of reach in the past due to domestic and family responsibilities.

Duvander, Ferrarini, and Thalberg (2005) found that separate taxation of spouses and access to quality day care allowed female labor force participation to increase from 50% in the mid-1960s to 80% in 2013 (World Bank, 2013). As a result of these policy decisions, women in Sweden have one of the highest levels of labor force participation in all of Europe (World Bank, 2013).

Women are powerful drivers of economic growth (Bjorkland, 1992). Economic security equips women with more influence when tackling injustice and discrimination in their communities. Sweden has chosen to invest in women (Isaksson, Johansson, Lindroth, & Sverke, 2006). By removing the constraints that prevent women from participating in the workforce, Sweden ensures women have the opportunity to become active economic agents who contribute to the national economy and enhance the standard of living for themselves and their families. Offering women the chance to become financially independent, and make the most of their creative potential in the labor market is essential in fostering higher standards of living, building stronger economies, and cultivating women leaders. Thus, Sweden has recognized everyone benefits when women make the most of their talent.

Purpose, Need, and Justification of the Study

Although many researchers have investigated the impact of Sweden's policies on the high rate of female workforce participation, few have examined the lived experiences of women leaders, and aspiring leaders, in the Swedish workforce. Thus, our study

seeks to explore this phenomenon. The purpose of this article is to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of professional women leaders working in Sweden. Sweden's welfare state provides fertile ground for the efficacy of women in the workforce. The generous publicly financed parental leave policy, child-care benefits, and educational opportunities (preschool through university level studies) contribute to this success. By examining relevant scholarship and conducting interviews with women in Sweden, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of Swedish women in leadership.

Review of the Literature

Two central areas will be discussed in this literature review. First, we examine the current working environment for women in Sweden, including access to leadership roles in managerial settings and on boards. Second, we review parental leave policies, child care, education, and legislation, as well as their impact on women in Sweden.

Women in the Swedish Workplace

Over the course of the 20th century, a significant shift occurred in the economic environment for women in Sweden. Today, women have the same, or higher levels, of education; women's labor force participation rate is at 81%; and women's share in higher paying professions, previously dominated by men, has risen substantially (Henrekson & Stenkula, 2009; Statistiska centralbyrån, 2014).

One of the most dramatic changes is the increase of women in positions of power in the political sphere. In the 1970s, Sweden implemented its first successful legislative gender quotas as a response to pressures from women's groups and female politicians (Saab, 2014). The government never employed a law or constitutional mandate to recruit women into politics; instead, political parties incorporated voluntary quotas to improve female recruitment (Saab, 2014). In this way, there was pressure to increase women's representation across all political parties (Saab, 2014). Sweden now has one of the highest rates of women in parliament in the world. Women make up 45% of the parliament and 64% of managers in the public sector (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015).

Where gender parity thrives in the public sector, Sweden's private sector has not seen the same female representation. Of the 62 largest publicly traded Swedish companies, only 5% have a woman as a chief executive (Stoll, 2014). Moreover, in 2011, women comprised only 28% of the managers (Swedish National Pension Fund, 2012). At present, Sweden has no law regulating gender representation in companies at the board or executive level (Stoll, 2014). However, Sweden is a member of the European Union, where the parliament is considering a 40% gender quota on boards of publicly traded companies (European Commission, 2012). Proponents contend quotas are necessary to overcome the systemic discrimination that has prevented women from reaching the top levels of leadership (Saab, 2014).

Henrekson and Stenkula (2009) proposed an alternative to quotas. They suggest in order for women in Sweden to strive for top executive leadership positions, there

needs to be a paradigm shift in corporate culture and career paths more compatible with child rearing. Women are willing and interested in increasing their career commitment, but only if it does not limit or diminish time spent with their family (Henrekson & Stenkula, 2009).

Additional studies point to the welfare state itself and the very policies that ensure women's participation in the workforce as contributing factors in preventing women from accessing leadership roles. Albrecht, Edin, Sundstrom, and Vroman (1999), as well as Meyersson Milgrom and Petersen (2006), found temporary career withdrawals (partial or complete) result in women's accumulating less experience, which lowers the likelihood of future promotion. With 480 days of parental leave per child, paid time off with sick children, and the legal right to work part-time, these policies may allow women to balance work and family responsibility, but it does not incentivize women to aim for high responsibility leadership positions.

Parental Leave, Child Care, and Education in Sweden

Sweden's political and legislative strategies, such as subsidized day care and job protected paid parental leave, have allowed more women to successfully combine work and family life. Access to comprehensive, affordable, and high-quality child care frees up women's time for formal employment (Lagarde, 2014). Subsequently, Swedes see generous shared parental leave as beneficial for the economy because it prevents the nation's investment in women's education and expertise from going to waste (Orange, 2012). Sweden has recognized policy implementation as one way to effectively boost women's economic opportunities and their participation in the workforce.

Maternity leave was first instituted in Sweden in the 1930s during the development of the modern welfare state (Baude, 1979). In an effort to increase women's labor force participation, and men's domestic involvement, maternity leave was replaced with parental insurance, *Föräldraförsäkring*, in 1974 (Duvander et al., 2005). This legislative decision came at a time when the Swedish economy entered a period of economic decline due to the loss of export markets, particularly in mining and shipping (Wiborg, 2010). As a result, the maternity-leave policy has evolved from a mechanism to encourage women to join what was a depleted workforce in the 1970s, to now serve as a tool for gender equality and home stability (Hansegard, 2012).

Sweden was the first country to introduce paid parental leave to fathers, and this legislation has since been continuously reformed to bring about a more equal parenthood (Duvander et al., 2005). The inclusion of both parents in the care of the newborn was thought to address the family imbalances in the distribution of unpaid care work, and to increase the possibility for more gender-equal labor market participation (Duvander et al., 2005). As a result, this legislative reform offered the chance for both men and women to combine work and family on a more equal basis.

Parental leave in Sweden entitles parents to a total of 480 days of parental leave when a child is born or adopted (Gender Equality in Sweden, 2015). This leave can be taken by the month, week, day, or even by the hour. According to the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (2014), if parents have joint custody of the child, each of them has

the right to half of the parental leave days. One of the parents may, however, transfer their leave to the other parent, with the exception of the 2 months that are reserved for each parent. Moreover, parents who equally share the transferable leave allowance receive a SEK 50 daily bonus, *jämställdhetsbonus*, for a maximum of 270 days, or 360 days for twins. Single-parent families are entitled to the full leave period (Duvander et al., 2005). Similarly, for 390 days of parental leave, the Swedish Social Service Agency will offer 80% wage replacement, with a maximum parental allowance of SEK 944 (USD 147) a day (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2014).

Effects of these Swedish policies are significant for working women and men. Parental insurance legislation, with earnings-related benefits, job guarantees, eligibility for reduced working hours, and a long leave period, is often seen as a primary explanation for why Sweden has been able to combine relatively high fertility levels with high female labor force participation rates and low child poverty. Publicly financed parental leave allows parents to reconcile work and family life while also maintaining their connection to the labor market through a guaranteed return to their job (International Monetary Fund, 2012). Availability of flexible work arrangements, including compressed work schedules and telework, allows women to better balance their formal employment with other demands on their time (International Monetary Fund, 2012). Workplace flexibility is associated with enhanced business effectiveness. Benefits of flexibility include employee loyalty/commitment, enhanced productivity, reduced stress and related elements that lower health insurance costs, enhanced recruitment, and decreased turnover (Barrett, 2011).

Another effect of parental insurance legislation is fathers have become significantly more involved in the care of young children. Even if a father decides to take a more modest leave, he must take at least 2 months (colloquially referred to as “daddy months”), before the child is 8 years old, to receive the government benefits (Hansegard, 2012). Thus, Swedish men are taking an ever-increasing responsibility for the home and family (Hansegard, 2012). Today, fathers use almost one fourth of the parental leave in Sweden, which is far from equal, but nevertheless the highest use of paternal leave in the Western world (Duvander et al., 2005).

Generous and flexible parental leave policies work in tandem with a high coverage rate for child care and education. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD; 2011) countries with the highest public spending as a share of GDP on child care and education services for children under the age of 5 were found to have high employment rates among mothers with young children. This finding is particularly evident in Sweden.

Similarly, tuition-free education from primary school to university has long been a pillar of Sweden’s welfare system (Fixing Sweden’s Schools, 2013). Wiborg (2010) suggests education is also the way in which Sweden has institutionalized the values of universalism and social egalitarianism. Sweden allows all people, regardless of social class or economic circumstances to access education. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2013) reports unprecedented growth in women’s higher education enrollment over the past four decades. The number of female students in tertiary institutions has grown almost twice as fast as that of men since 1970 (Chien, 2010).

Nursery school, *förskola*, is open to children from 1 to 5 years of age (Education in Sweden, 2015). Municipalities have an obligation to provide such facilities for children whose parents work or study. More than 80% of children from 1 to 5 years of age spend part of their weekdays in *förskola*. This is high by international standards, yet Sweden's large share of dual-earner families could account for high enrollment rates. Because both parents participate in the workforce, they take advantage of the subsidized child care. Another contributing factor to high enrollment rates is Sweden's maximum-fee policy, which makes child care affordable for everyone. Fees are calculated according to income, with low-income families paying nothing, and more affluent parents' costs capped at SEK 1,260 (USD 194) per month. The policy states parents should only have to spend 1% to 3% of the family's income on child care, depending on how many children they have (Play Is Key in Preschool, 2013).

All children are offered a place in non-compulsory primary school starting in the fall term of the year they turn 6 until they start compulsory schooling (Education in Sweden, 2015). Children between 6 and 13 are also offered out-of-school care, *fritidshem*, before and after school hours. This can be at an after-school center, a family day-care home, or an open after-school program. The purpose of state subsidized child care is to allow Swedish parents to participate in the workforce without incurring significant extra costs (i.e., paying for child care) and ensuring children have a safe place to go after school while parents are still at work.

Free education continues into university for Swedish students (Education in Sweden, 2015). Research regarding university education suggests significant implications for society as a whole. In particular, individuals with more education earn more, and are more satisfied with their work and leisure time. They are also less likely to be unemployed, more likely to be healthy, less likely to be criminals, more likely to volunteer their time, and more likely to vote in elections (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010).

This collective sensitivity toward women in the workforce has a powerful ripple effect benefitting families, communities, workplaces, economies, and societies at large (Parlapiano, 2014). However, perhaps what is most significant about Sweden's high rate of women in the workforce is by employing women, Sweden does not simply take a stand on fairness and equality, rather, it also recognizes empowering women to be economic agents will raise the standard of living for all citizens.

Methodology and Method

Our study considered the following research question: What is it like to be a professional woman leader living and working in Sweden today? We leveraged a qualitative research design, specifically hermeneutic phenomenology, which enables the researcher to focus on the entirety of the subject's worldhood (Heidegger, 1962). Data regarding the lives of women leaders in Sweden was gathered via 25 in-depth interviews with professional women leaders from a variety of industries in Sweden.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology owes its historical roots to 20th-century Europe. German philosophers Husserl, Ditley, Heidegger, and Gadamer; Scandinavian philosopher Kierkegaard; and French philosophers Sartre, Ricoeur, and Merleau-Ponty have all contributed to the field of phenomenology. Phenomenology is a qualitative method that studies the concepts of everyday life as it is experienced by individuals (Hultgren, 1989). It focuses on the conscious experience of a person as he or she relates to the lived world (Lanigan, 1988). van Manen (1990) described phenomenology as the explication of phenomena as it presents itself to the consciousness. It aims to understand the meaning and nature of our everyday experience, fundamentally asking, what is this or that kind of experience like? Phenomenology seeks to gain understanding from interviewees in an open, unrestricting way. Research participants are viewed as human beings who signify—give meaning to and derive meaning from—their world (van Manen, 1990). This approach allows for authentic representation of participants without manipulating, altering, or reshaping their life experiences (Anderson & Jack, 1991).

Phenomenological studies involve a three-step process: (a) gathering descriptions of lived experience (description), (b) reviewing data to reveal essential themes (reduction), and (c) determining the inter-relatedness of the themes and how they reflect the essence of the phenomena (interpretation). The process allows for bracketing, which is the setting aside of preconceived ideas and focusing on describing the lived experiences of others. The final step in phenomenology involves an interpretation of the key themes as they relate to the phenomenon (Orbe, 2000).

Research Design and Participants

The first author had traveled to Sweden three times prior to data collection and is of Swedish American descent. She also attended an American liberal arts college, rooted in the Swedish heritage. The second author had traveled to Sweden two times prior to data collection, had researched women and quotas on boards in Norway, and teaches at an American liberal arts college rooted in the Swedish heritage. As women in leadership researchers, both were curious to learn more why Sweden is one of the best places for women to live and work in the world.

Data collection was conducted over a 1-month period and involved 25 professional working females living in Sweden. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) women who lived in Sweden for 5 (or more) years, (b) had 5 (or more) years of work experience, and (c) were currently in a managerial or leadership position. These criteria ensured all participants had ample immersion and experience within Sweden's professional workplace. Although many women were already established leaders (e.g., partners at law firms, corporate executives), others were recent managers or had only begun leading teams in recent years (see Table 1 for an overview of participant demographic information).

To identify our initial participants, we took a purposive sampling approach. Participants were selected based on those who have had experiences related to the

Table 1. Participant Information.

| Demographics | Total | % | M | Range |
|---|-------|----|----|-------|
| Age (years) | | | 46 | 33-70 |
| Current location of residence in Sweden | | | | |
| City with population less than 15,000 | 7 | 28 | | |
| City with population more than 15,000 | 18 | 72 | | |
| Occupation/industry | | | | |
| Finance and banking | 3 | 12 | | |
| Public relations and communications | 9 | 36 | | |
| Health care | 1 | 4 | | |
| Insurance | 1 | 4 | | |
| Law | 2 | 8 | | |
| Engineering | 3 | 12 | | |
| Information technology | 1 | 4 | | |
| Retail and consumer products | 2 | 8 | | |
| Human resources | 2 | 8 | | |
| Manufacturing | 1 | 4 | | |
| Number of children | | | | |
| 0 | 3 | 12 | | |
| 1 | 3 | 12 | | |
| 2 | 17 | 68 | | |
| 3 | 1 | 4 | | |
| 4 | 1 | 4 | | |
| Country of origin | | | | |
| Sweden | 22 | 88 | | |
| Germany | 1 | 4 | | |
| Bosnia | 1 | 4 | | |
| United Kingdom | 1 | 4 | | |
| Prior residence | | | | |
| Lived in other countries | 7 | 28 | | |
| Only lived in Sweden | 18 | 72 | | |

phenomenon. To find additional participants, we used a snowball approach to find participants to interview. Snowballing is a method of expanding the sample by asking one participant to recommend others for interviewing (Browne, 2005). We requested the purposive sample participants to give, at their discretion, the names and contact information of women in professional roles who fit within our research criteria. Descriptions of lived experiences were collected via in-depth interviews where they were asked to describe their experience as a working woman leader in Sweden.

Interviews

In-depth interviews allowed participants to tell their unique stories in their own words (Anderson & Jack, 1991). These sessions lasted from 30 to 90 min. A conversational

interviewing strategy encouraged a balance between remaining flexible to the interests of the respondents and maintaining focus on the topic of study. We began each interview asking participants, "What is your experience as a woman leader in Sweden?" Subsequent questions were asked as they related to the interviewee's initial response to our study's principal question.

To ensure ethical research, we made use of informed consent (Groenewald, 2004). Our informed consent agreement informed participants of the following:

- They are participating in research
- The purpose of the research (without stating the central research question)
- The procedures of the research
- The risk and benefits of the research
- The voluntary nature of research participation
- The participant's right to stop the research at any time
- The procedures used to protect confidentiality

Bailey (1996) observes that deception might prevent insights, whereas honesty coupled with confidentiality reduces suspicion and promotes sincere responses.

Data Collection and Analysis

With the permission of the participants, all interviews were audio recorded. Recordings were then transcribed verbatim by the first author. This process resulted in 101 pages of self-described lived experiences. On completion, transcripts were read, reviewed, bracketed, re-read, and re-bracketed by both authors until a chain of initial themes emerged (Orbe, 2000). The study was conducted under the guidelines and approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Gustavus Adolphus College.

Findings

Five main themes emerged from the interview data: (a) Compared with other countries, Sweden is a good place for women to live and work; (b) couples seek to have equal gender roles in the home; (c) tax incentives from the government have helped families afford child care and domestic cleaning help at home; (d) permanently leaving the workforce after becoming a mother is uncommon for women in Sweden; and (e) salary discrepancies still exist between genders in Sweden.

Sweden Is a Good Place for Women to Live and Work

Eleven of the 25 interviewees stated Sweden is a good place for women to live and work. One respondent explained why Sweden has made this a priority:

I think Sweden is a good country for women to work in because Sweden has this equality. We want to be the world's conscience. We have this way of thinking. We also believe

people should have the same possibilities. Our politicians would say, "We are all equal." It has been a focus here.

Another woman described a typical situation for a Swedish couple:

Mom and dad are usually home with the child until he or she is one and a half. The child attends kindergarten or day care until they are six. The parents believe this is good for the child to socialize with other children. It gives both parents the opportunity to work.

A few other respondents compared the Swedish system with countries without child-care laws:

When we lived in Cairo, my husband only took three days off when our child was born because that's what the local conditions entitled him to. In Sweden, the traditional way to do it is for both mom and dad to take off nine months each separately. It is much more progressive and better for the child, too.

The United States was the next country for comparison:

I was pregnant and knew that in the United States, I would only receive six weeks of maternity leave in comparison to 18 months total for my husband and me together, so we moved to Sweden. It was an easy choice.

Germany was also compared with Sweden by another woman:

When I compare the husbands of my girlfriends in Germany and how they do not help out with the kids and the house, it is nothing like Sweden. That is why we stay here.

A final quote for this theme explains the importance of Swedish child care, sick leave, and holidays:

I believe the worst thing for a woman is to leave the newborn child. You always feel more guilty as a mother in comparison to the father. Child care is the biggest obstacle towards having a woman's career. For Sweden, it is much more common for both parents to work today. We also have six to seven weeks of holiday pay. In addition, we have sick leave pay for our children. All of these things make it much easier for women to have children, knowing they can get them raised up without having to leave them as tiny infants. Sweden is a very good country compared to other places.

Couples Seek to Have Equal Gender Roles

Ten of the 15 married participants shared their partners took paternity leave when their child was born. All 15 married women reported they actively seek to have equal gender roles in the home. One woman stated happily,

Oh yes, we are 50/50 at our house. We both cook and pick up the kids from day care and go grocery shopping 50%. I'm in such a good place with my spouse and the family responsibilities. Sometimes it turns out that if I'm doing more, he gets a bad conscience about it!

Two women discussed the idea of differing expectations in terms of cleaning and how it can, at times, cause conflict. The first interviewee said,

Sometimes we women blame the men for not stepping up enough or doing enough within their homes and their children. Even though Sheryl Sandberg suggests we "lean in" at work, at times I think we need to "lean out" at home and let the men do the work without us criticizing them that it's not been done well enough.

Another woman agreed:

If there is anything that I see, it is that women complain that their husbands won't step up and it's also a fact that men get scolded for not doing things the way that women would do it. So what!

Finally, one woman summarized this theme by stating,

I think Swedish culture supports both parents, not necessarily women specifically. The benefit system encourages men to take their paternity leave. In our generation, I don't know anyone that doesn't share the 480 paid days off after a child is born. I actually know a lot of people where the dad actually does a lot more than the mother.

Subsidy Incentives From the Government Include Child Care and Domestic Cleaning

Ten of the participants discussed the impact of government subsidized child care and house cleaning costs. Because costs for these services are determined based on a sliding scale, everyone has access. One woman indicated how accessible child care is in Sweden:

Here the society regulates they must provide you with kindergarten (child care) from the time a child is 15 months old. You have the right to have a place to put your child. And there is a maximum limit on how much it can cost. You can afford it so that you can easily go back to work.

The government subsidy allowed domestic services, such as cleaning, to be socially acceptable:

Now we have this new taxation structure which means that you can buy help for your house and you get half from the government. It is up to 50,000 Swedish crowns per year, per person. This means you can have people clean your house and wash your windows and it gives a lot of people work. I never had someone cleaning my house because it was socially not quite accepted. It makes life much easier, especially if you are working outside the home.

The Swedish government offers incentives for families to put their children in child care and encourages Swedes to hire help for taking care of their homes.

Swedish Women Rarely Leave the Workplace for Child Care Reasons

Interviewees discredited the idea of staying home with their children. Twelve of the 25 respondents commented on the notion of exiting the workforce after becoming a mother. One woman stated,

That really isn't an option here. It would be difficult for a family to live on only one salary. I don't know anyone who does not work.

Another woman agreed:

There is no such thing in Sweden. I know one woman who stayed home with her children. But it's just one.

A third respondent mentioned,

That would feel very strange! I think we would manage economically, but for my personal well-being, I would never consider doing that. I would not be happy staying at home.

Another woman provided a different explanation for why Swedish women do not opt out of the workforce to stay at home with their children:

It is rare for women to do that, staying home instead of working. My sister-in-law's husband is doing very well in his career, and so she has been a stay at home mom. Her ideas and thoughts are so different from all of the working women. This is terrible. You can tell she has been home for 13 years. I think it is much harder for her to socialize.

Salary Discrepancies Among Genders

Six of the 25 women interviewed for this study indicated there are still salary discrepancies between men and women working in the same position in Sweden. One woman indicated this is an important area Sweden could still improve on:

Women still don't get equal pay for the same job. We have a problem with that. The government is trying to improve this situation, but women in health care are not paid what they should be, especially our nurses.

Another woman specifically reported on women working in health care:

The fact is that we still only make 83 crowns to the 100 crowns for men on average doing the same job. It is the most glaring injustice in the public sector. Nurses' salaries, for example, are an absolute disgrace.

The women in this study suggested that there is room for improvement for gender fairness in Sweden. Salary equity was highlighted as the main area for improvement.

Discussion

The following section discusses the five themes that emerged from the study and compares them with the previously published literature. The main themes that emerged from the interview data included the following: (a) Compared with other countries, Sweden is a good place for women to live and work; (b) couples work to have equal gender roles in the home; (c) tax incentives from the government have helped families afford child care and domestic cleaning help at home; (d) permanently leaving the workforce after becoming a mother is uncommon for women in Sweden; and (e) salary discrepancies still exist between genders in Sweden.

Compared With Other Countries, Sweden Is a Good Place for Women to Live and Work

Researchers have argued that affordable child care, generous parental leave, and access to education are primary contributing factors in Sweden's high female workforce participation rates (Duvander et al., 2005; Hansegard, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Participants in our study upheld the powerful impact of those policies in women's decision to live and work in Sweden. Our study found native and non-native Swedish women believed Sweden is a better place for women leaders to live and work, particularly in comparison with other parts of Europe or the United States. Respondents discussed the parental leave policy for both fathers and mothers, paid time off with sick children, the legal right to work part-time, and paid vacation time as benefits not commonly seen elsewhere in the world.

Couples Seek to Have Equal Gender Roles in the Home

Our findings confirm that fathers share parental and domestic responsibilities. In our study, women told us their life partners cook meals, drive their children to day care, and do laundry. Women felt they were able to dedicate more time to their professional endeavors when they knew they could share family-related responsibilities with their spouse. They also explained that they felt empowered to take on managerial roles and positions that might have been too time-intensive if they did not have a partner who split the domestic responsibilities.

Tax Incentives Have Allowed Families to Afford Child Care and Domestic Cleaning Help at Home

Different from previous literature, our findings suggested government subsidized domestic help and cleaning services are also key in Swedish women's, especially

women with children, willingness to work. Without the burden of cleaning and caring for the home, women can justify working full-time, and then the time that previously would have been dedicated to house chores, women can use to spend with their families.

Similarly, our research confirmed the findings from Hansegard (2012) whereby the high saturation of mothers in the workplace is linked to affordable child care. Interviewees explained that women raising a family in Sweden would rarely consider permanently leaving the labor market to stay at home with their children as child care is accessible to all families. Consequently, Swedish women do not need to stay home, and exit the workforce, to provide child care.

Permanently Leaving the Workforce After Becoming a Mother Is Uncommon for Women in Sweden

Prior to our study, we did not find references to this phenomenon in the current literature. Research participants explained that because child care is affordable and guaranteed to all families, they do not need to consider permanently exiting the workforce to take care of their children.

Salary Discrepancies Still Exist Between Genders in Sweden

In line with what Henrekson and Stenkula (2009) and Meyersson Milgrom and Petersen (2006) found in their research, our study found that Swedish women are dissatisfied with the discrepancies and barriers to entry that still exist for women in leadership. Research participants were specifically frustrated with the lack of equal pay for equal work. This was seen as an important area for improvement for the lives of women in Sweden.

Implications for HRD Practice and Recommendations for Future Research

Our study raises noteworthy implications for HRD and leadership development professionals. As long as females are underrepresented in leadership positions, the advancement of women should be a primary focus for global HRD professionals. Furthermore, HRD professionals are well-suited for designing, developing, and implementing programs that provide leadership training and professional development for women in Sweden and across the globe.

The retention of women in the workplace is key in identifying the best candidates for leadership roles and maximizing human capital in any organization. Our study demonstrated that accessible day care for working parents is critical in retaining women in the workforce. Sweden's subsidized child care eliminates the barrier other women across the globe describe as a primary factor that prevents them from re-entering the workforce after having children.

HRD professionals have the opportunity and responsibility to advocate for leadership development that intentionally creates opportunities for women. For global organizations, this includes prioritizing equitable pay. Salary discrepancies continue to plague even the best ranked countries in the world for women to live and work. To eliminate this justice issue, and stay competitive in the talent market, equal pay should be at the forefront of HRD professionals' business strategies.

Likewise, leadership development professionals need a better understanding of what motivates women to move into senior leadership roles—and to what extent those motivators differ in ways related to gender. Our study found women are willing and interested in increasing their career commitment, and taking on leadership roles, but only if it does not interfere with time spent with their family. For this reason, HRD professionals ought to study best practices in countries around the world to continue to reveal best practices in developing, promoting, and retaining women leaders. Similarly, much of our research outcomes stemmed from Sweden's welfare state policies. Additional research is needed as to how other countries that lack Sweden's generous government subsidies and policies can provide similar support to all of its population, particularly in the areas of cost-effective/free education and paternity leave.

Conclusion

One interviewee provided a meaningful conclusion to our research by saying,

The leaders of our country agreed that we have to get the best out of our population. You shouldn't miss 50% of the talent. This is what has driven the policies to incent and encourage women to stay in the workforce even through their childbearing years. 100% of the

Nearly 1 billion women will enter the global economy for the first time in the coming decade alone (Aguirre, 2012). Women will dramatically reshape the economic landscape—as the world's most untapped resource.

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Authors Biographies

Elizabeth R. Johnson recently completed her undergraduate studies at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. In June, 2014, she graduated with a bachelor of arts in management and communication studies. Her research interests include leadership and gender, work/life balance, and parental leave policies, particularly in the context of Scandinavia. She currently lives in Chicago, Illinois, where she is a consultant in the Global Employer Services practice of Deloitte Tax, LLP.

Katherine A. Tunheim is the Board of Trustees Chair in Management and Leadership in the Economics and Management Department at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. She earned her doctoral degree in human resource development at the University of Minnesota part-time while leading leadership development and organizational effectiveness teams at Northwest Airlines, Carlson Companies, and American Express Financial Advisors in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her responsibilities at Gustavus include leading two distinctive programs, Gustavus Women in Leadership and the Gustavus Mentoring Program.