

## Case Study: Sweden

# Sweden: A Step-wise Development

Lena Wängnerud

In 1971 the proportion of women in the Swedish Parliament was 14 percent. Since the last election, in 2002, the proportion is 45 percent. The difference is remarkable; in 30 years there has been a threefold development. The increase is also visible in government where in 2005, 11 out of 22 cabinet ministers are women. This case study will focus on the story behind the figures and discuss how women have effected change in parliament.<sup>1</sup> Since 1985 the proportion of women in the Swedish Parliament has exceeded 30 percent. Even though it is hard to say what would constitute a critical mass, the number has been comparatively high for a long period of time.

If changes occur as a result of women's representation, traces of this should be visible in Sweden.

### ***Increase in Sheer Numbers***

To understand the process behind the increase in the numbers of women in parliament, we have to examine Swedish politics 40 years ago. Then women were clearly less involved in politics than their male counterparts: fewer participated in elections or became party members, and they were also heavily under-represented in leading positions within parties as well as within decision-making bodies.

The turning point occurred in 1972. The leaders of the two leading parties at that time, the Liberals and the Social Democrats, started to compete to win female voters. The strategic reasoning behind this was that winning women's votes would mean gaining more seats and hence increased power. Measures were taken to enhance the status of gender equality as an issue on the political agenda as well as to put up certain goals for women's representation. Two important factors in particular can be mentioned: in 1972 Socialdemokratiska arbetarpartiet (the Social Democratic Party), being in power at that time, introduced a central gender policy unit in government;

and in the same year the Liberal Party was the first party in Sweden to formally recommend that women should make up 40 percent of its internal leadership positions, as in the party's governing board.

The process that took place in Sweden can be characterized by two features: integration; and step-wise development. Integration means that, even though there have been, and still are, women's federations in Swedish politics, they have always worked inside the established party structures. It also means that measures concerning women's representation have been a subject for broad debate within parties. Women's federations have worked as a vanguard in this field; however, the final decisions have always been reached in each party's highest decision-making forum—the regular national party meetings. The consequence of this is that, with seven different parties represented in the parliament, as is currently the case in Sweden, we will find seven slightly different stories.

The issue of women's representation has thus been on the agenda in all parties; however, they have not all adopted numerical goals like a 40 : 60 gender balance on political party lists. The Conservative Party and the Centre Party are examples of parties that are still relying on more 'soft' strategies, like loosely formulated goals for equality.

However, step-wise development can be seen as a catchword for a more general picture. For most of the parties, more loosely formulated goals have over time been transformed into stricter recommendations, and three parties have implemented quotas. In the Swedish case quotas mean regulations voluntarily written into the statute of a party and not into the constitution of Sweden. The Green Party has adopted quotas from the start, since it was set up in 1981. For the Left Party the decision to use quotas came in 1987, and for the Social Democrats in 1993. In most cases measures focusing on internal party structures (boards etc.) have preceded measures focusing on party lists.

With or without quotas, the competition that once started between Liberals and Social Democrats now includes all parties. With few exceptions, Swedish party leaders today describe themselves as 'feminists'. Since 1994 the slogan of 'every second seat for a woman' is rooted within Swedish politics, symbolizing an ambition to alternate women and men on lists for election to different powerful positions and not just include women for the sake of window-dressing.

### ***Transforming the Agenda***

However, if we understand the processes behind the increase in women's representation as a purely strategic manoeuvre, we will not get a complete grasp of the whole picture. While it is obvious from the documentation of different parties that there have indeed been calculations as to how to gain more (female) votes, there has also been serious consideration of how to use this increased power—how to change the situation of women in society and reach gender equality in a deeper sense.

Studies indicate that women in Sweden today are better integrated into politics than they were in the 1960s. Since 1976 women's turnout in elections has been slightly higher than men's. The gender gap in both political interest (subjectively measured) and party membership has decreased, although it has not completely vanished. A strong indicator of change is the figures quoted earlier in this case study—the shift from 14 percent women in the Swedish Parliament in 1971 to 45 percent in 2004.

The tricky question, then, is how to capture qualitative changes stemming from shifts in gender balances and to move beyond examining sheer numbers. In attempting to make these assessments, there is a dual risk. On the one hand, there is the risk of over-expectation, or using vague criteria in the haste to prove impact of women's efforts and the change wrought by their political participation. On the other hand, underestimation can also take place, whereby harsh criteria are used that ultimately overlook contributions and interpret women's efforts as being limited to the domain of tokenism.

To be able to draw valid conclusions we have to understand the political process. What is taking place in the parliament, at least in the chamber, can be compared to the tip of an iceberg. When a final decision is about to be reached each political issue has been through a period of processing. Most of the time this process is stretched out over many years and involves meetings in many different settings such as parliamentary committees and different groups within parties.

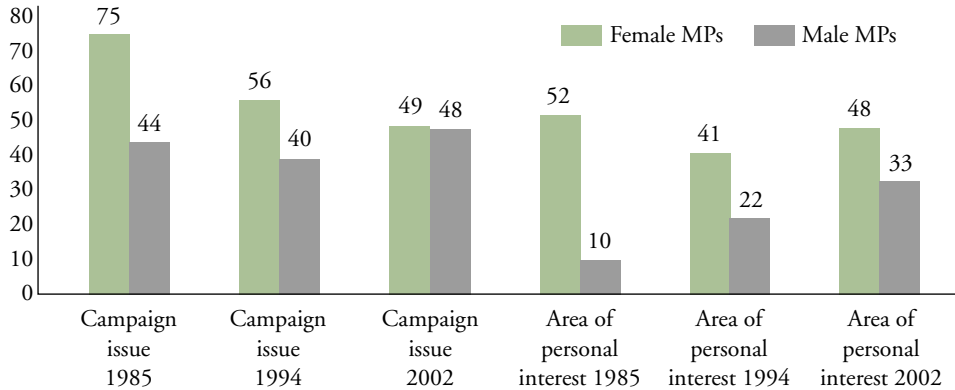
To capture what is going on beneath the surface without actually being there, we have to rely on indicators that reflect the process. One way of doing so is to use questionnaires and personal interviews with central actors. In the following section I will use some examples of questions posed to Swedish members of parliament (MPs) about their political work. The samples focus on campaign issues and areas of personal interest. In no question is the issue of gender raised outright. Instead the answers have been subjected to gender analysis afterwards (what are the answers among women, what are the answers among men?). The questions have been open-ended and each politician could mention whatever issue they wanted.

In analysing the answers I have used a broad definition of the concept of 'women's interests'. On a theoretical level the aim has been to capture policies that can be expected to increase the autonomy of female citizens. Even in Sweden there is a division of labour between women and men, with women more frequently engaged in different sorts of care work, both privately within the family and publicly in the professional care sectors such as health and the care of the elderly and children.

The assumption is that, to be able to increase gender equality in a society, women's interests have to be voiced. The empirical question then is: do women MPs have an agenda that differs from that of their male colleagues? Are women MPs giving women's interests a voice? Figure 9 shows the number of male and female MPs who mentioned social policy, family policy, care of the elderly or health care as a campaign issue or an area of personal interest in 1985, 1994 and 2002. These four items can be seen as a broad way of conceptualizing women's interests.

**Figure 9: Women's Interests on the Agenda of Swedish MPs, 1985–2002**

Figures are percentages.



**Note:** The figure shows the responses to two open questions which read, in the following order: ‘Which issue/s or problem/s did you emphasize most in your campaign work before this year’s election?’ (up to five issues could be mentioned); and ‘Which political issue area/s are you personally most interested in?’ (up to three issues could be mentioned). The responses were coded according to a detailed coding scheme. The numbers shown are the percentages of female and male MPs who included women’s interests among either set of issues. Included in the category ‘women’s interests’ were responses referring to social policy, policy on the family, health care and care of the elderly. The numbers of respondents (women : men) were: in 1985, 96 : 218; in 1994, 132 : 190; and in 2002 142 : 175. The total number of MPs in the Swedish Parliament has been 349 since 1976.

**Source:** Parliament Studies of 1985, 1988 and 1994. The Swedish Election Study Program at the Department of Political Science, Gothenburg University.

Figure 9 shows several important results. The first is that there is a connection between the sex of politicians and the extent to which they pursue women’s interests. In 1985, 75 percent of female MPs addressed issues of social policy, family policy, care of the elderly or health care in their election campaigns. The corresponding figure among male MPs was 44 percent. In that same year, 1985, 52 percent of female MPs stated care policies as an area of personal interest, while the proportion of male MPs who did so was 10 percent.

The second important result is that, although there gender differences were found upon the two subsequent survey occasions, the gap has closed over time. I will come back to this below.

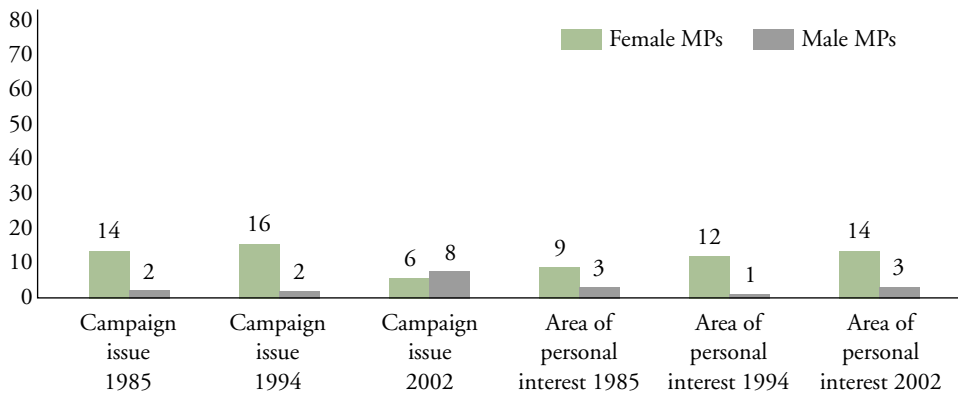
The third significant result shown in figure 9 has to do with comparison of the various arenas. Gender differences were consistently greater when it came to politicians’ personal agendas—those that show up when they state their own areas of interest—than on the agenda that appears in the election campaign. This is important

to notice because different arenas can be exposed to different levels of outside control. The election campaign, for example, is an arena that is centrally controlled to a considerable extent by the parties. One can assume that the ‘personal interest’ indicator is the measure that best corresponds to what is happening in the everyday world of politics, that is, who is putting forward women’s interests in meetings, in committees and so on.

Before drawing any further conclusions we should also consider specifically the dimension of gender equality. What happens if we take a more narrow definition of women’s interests and only include policy priorities that are exclusively directed towards changes in gender balances? Figure 10 shows the number of male and female MPs who mentioned gender equality explicitly as a campaign issue or an area of personal interest in 1985, 1994 and 2002.

**Figure 10: Gender Equality on the Agenda of Swedish MPs, 1985–2002**

Figures are percentages.



**Note:** The figure shows the responses to two open questions which read, in the following order: ‘Which issue/s or problem/s did you emphasize most in your campaign work before this year’s election?’ (up to five issues could be mentioned); and ‘Which political issue area/s are you personally most interested in?’ (up to three issues could be mentioned). The responses were coded according to a detailed code scheme. The numbers shown are the percentages of female and male MPs who included gender equality among either set of issues. Included in the category ‘gender equality’ were responses referring explicitly to shifts in gender balances (promoting women). The numbers of respondents (women : men) were: in 1985, 96 : 218; in 1994, 132 : 190; and in 2002, 142 : 175. The total number of MPs in the Swedish Parliament has been 349 since 1976.

**Source:** Parliament Studies of 1985, 1988 and 1994. The Swedish Election Study Program at the Department of Political Science, Gothenburg University.

A cursory overview shows that, when defined in this way, women's interests are a much less visible issue on the political agenda in Sweden. But the main result is that women MPs are more heavily engaged in this field than their male colleagues, the only exception to this being the election campaign in 2002.

By relying on a wider range of indicators than those presented above, there are two important conclusions that can be drawn from the research among Swedish MPs.

The first is that there are some areas which are very seldom promoted by men in politics. Gender equality is one example. My conclusion is that this is an issue that women have placed on the political agenda. Without female politicians there is a risk that there would be silence on issues of gender equality. Women to a large extent initiate the discussions here.

The second conclusion is that there are some areas where we can notice a shift in emphasis when we get more women elected. These areas have to do with the politics of care, like social policy, family policy and care of the elderly. What do I mean by a shift in emphasis? Effectively, men promote these kinds of issues, but the difference is that women give them an even higher priority. There is clearly a male and a female dimension to politics in Sweden. I thus maintain that the high number of women in the parliament has meant that the female dimension has become stronger.

### ***Division of Work or Real Transformation?***

The conclusions presented above can be viewed from two different angles: as a classic gender-based division of labour, or more dynamically as a real transformation. Reading between the lines, I tend to favour the interpretation that this is dynamic transformation. However, this cannot be taken for granted. Analyses such as those presented so far in this case study are significantly reinforced by studies of gender awareness or gender sensitivity, as well as by surveys of MPs' contacts with women's organizations outside the parliamentary arena. To be able to change things, women politicians need a platform.

Table 18 shows the degree of contact between Swedish MPs and women's organizations. It indicates that female politicians are in more frequent contact with women's organizations than male politicians. Taken as a group therefore they have a platform outside the parliamentary arena. I will not provide any figures on this but our statistics also indicate that women are gender-sensitive in the sense that they are more strongly in favour of changes in the direction of more gender equality in the future. An additional way of supporting the assessment that there has been a dynamic transformation is to ask the politicians themselves. In 1994 we asked the following question to the MPs: 'In the past 20 years, the proportion of women has increased in most parties in the Riksdag (the Swedish Parliament). Are there concrete issues where you believe the position of your party has changed because of the increased

representation of women?'. A majority of Swedish MPs (75 percent among women and 50 percent among men) agreed that there have been changes, and the areas most frequently mentioned were gender equality, family policy and social policy.

**Table 18: Degree of Contact between Swedish MPs and Women's Organizations**

Figures are percentages.

Year	Frequent contact (percentage)			No contact (percentage)		
	Women MPs	Men MPs	Difference	Women MPs	Men MPs	Difference
1985	55	9	+46	4	14	- 10
1994	51	4	+47	4	18	- 14
2002	40	6	+34	3	14	- 11

**Note:** The question read: 'This question deals with your contacts as a politician with various organizations, groups and authorities in the past year. Disregarding how the contact was made, how often have you in the past year, personally or by letter, been in touch with any of the organizations, groups or authorities listed below?'. The MPs were asked to state their degrees of contact with about 20 different organizations, among which were listed women's organizations. They could state in their responses whether contact took place at least once a week, once or twice a month, a few times, occasionally or never. The table shows those who answered once a week or once or twice a month (frequent contact) and the percentage who answered never (no contact). The number of respondents (women : men) was: in 1985, 99 : 229; in 1994, 134 : 191; and in 2002, 142 : 175.

**Source:** Parliament Studies of 1985 and 1994. The Swedish Election Study Program at the Department of Political Science, Gothenburg University.

### ***Different Phases***

The results presented here challenge the unreflective or naive 'gender neutrality' which one has to remember still characterizes much of the research on representative democracy. But one also has to remember that, even if gender matters, this does not happen consistently or universally. The main conclusions presented above are visible even if we take party affiliation, age, education, parliamentary experience and so on into account. However, this does not mean that women in all parties behave or think in the same way; party ideology, as well as a number of other considerations, must also be taken into account, as other chapters in this Handbook indicate.

There is, naturally, a risk that the patterns described here confirm rather than change existing power relations. However, it is likely that what we have at hand is a development that can be described in terms of different phases. The fact that women have historically contributed to greater emphasis being put on the social welfare aspects of politics does not necessarily mean that they should confine themselves to

this area for all time. Seen from a longer-term perspective, it would in fact be rather odd if women and men did not eventually exercise power and influence in all political domains to roughly the same extent. However, I believe it is almost impossible to go from a low proportion of female parliamentarians to a high proportion without going through a stage in which patterns of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ appear with respect to the content of politics.

In recent years efforts have been made to try to bridge gender gaps. One of the most visible arenas for this is the composition of the standing committees in the Swedish Parliament. Altogether there are 16 standing committees dealing with different areas. During the 1980s and early 1990s women were strongly *over-represented* (compared to the average in parliament) in committees dealing with social welfare, such as the committees on social insurance, health and welfare, education and the labour market. Simultaneously they were *under-represented* in committees dealing with economic or technical issues such as taxation, finance, industry and trade, and transport. However, since the election of 1994, when the slogan ‘Every second seat for a woman’ really became rooted in Swedish politics, the picture has been more balanced. The explanation behind this is to be found on an institutional level: the leadership in different parties decided to make changes. This was a result of dual pressure—pressure both from inside (women’s federations and others) and from feminist networks outside the parties.

### ***How Have Changes Been Made?***

One of the main findings emerging from this case study is that changes often occur in ‘hidden’ arenas and at a slow pace. It is hard to give exact answers to questions like ‘What are the main achievements?’ or ‘How have changes been made?’. However, many indicators point in the same direction: studies of speeches made in parliament or on motions or bills put forward also reveal the importance of gender. What is somewhat missing, however, is studies on the output side, meaning the ‘real’ effect of politics (or policies) on citizens.

On the other hand, one of the frequently mentioned important gains for women is the comparatively generous system for parental leave in Sweden. The parental leave system also tries to enable both women and men to take an active part in the responsibilities of caring for children. Moreover, Sweden, like many other countries, also has legislation against sex discrimination and for abortion rights.

Equally under-researched is the area of precise strategies used to affect change. However, a few more features can be mentioned here.

1. Partnership and collaboration with men is an important factor.
2. Integration was mentioned earlier, and it is important to underscore that women in Sweden have to a great extent chosen to work inside the established party structures.

3. At the same time they have formed their own federations and networks and also been in touch with women outside parliament.

This way of working has been termed a *double strategy* which can be understood as women MPs working together with women's organizations but also working together with men.

A few more concrete examples of strategies include those adopted by the former speaker of the Swedish Parliament, Birgitta Dahl, who during the 1990s introduced a series of meetings in parliament inviting guests to discuss different aspects of gender equality but also democracy in a wider sense. A child care centre was also introduced in parliament, enabling MPs with small children from outside the capital to have their family, at least for a time, with them in Stockholm.

### ***No Glorious World***

When I use the expression 'step-wise development' I want to highlight that one cannot expect a linear development. Sweden is no glorious world for women, even though many things surely work quite well. Even women in Swedish politics will encounter challenges and be subjected to stereotyping. The question is whether we will ever achieve a truly gender-equal society, with no subordination for women. There have been setbacks for women in recent years when the economy in Sweden has been under pressure. What we can learn from the Swedish experience is that under these circumstances, when the political system is under stress, one has to be even more aware of women's interests.

Even if gender equality remains a utopian goal we have to believe in the possibility of reaching *more* equality between women and men. In the process of realizing that ambition, women MPs are important actors.

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> Most of this case study builds on research presented in the author's dissertation (Wängnerud 1998) and related work (Wängnerud 2000a and 2000b). However, a deeper study of the process within the parties is presented in Wängnerud 2001, and indicators relating to political participation among female citizens are presented in Oskarson and Wängnerud 1995. The Swedish Election Study Program sends questionnaires to voters as well as to MPs. Sören Holmberg, Peter Esaiasson and Martin Brothén have also been responsible for the investigations referred to in the text. Some figures have been updated for this case study and have not been published elsewhere.

## References and Further Reading

- Oskarson, Maria and Lena Wängnerud, 1995. *Kvinnor som väljare och valda: Om betydelsen av kön i svensk politik* [Women as voters and elected MPs: On the importance of gender within Swedish politics]. Lund: Studentlitteratur
- Wängnerud, Lena, 1998. *Politikens andra sida. Om kvinnorepresentation i den svenska riksdagen* [The second face of democracy: Women's representation in the Swedish Parliament]. Gothenburg: Göteborg Studies in Politics
- 2000a, 'Testing the Politics of Presence: Women's Representation in the Swedish Riksdag'. *Scandinavian Political Studies*. Vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 67–91
- 2000b, 'Representing Women', in Peter Esaiasson and Knut Heidar. *Beyond Westminster and Congress. The Nordic Experience*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press
- 2001, 'Kvinnors röst: En kamp mellan partier' [Female votes: A competition between parties], in Christer Jönsson (ed.), *Rösträtten 80 år* [Eighty years of the suffrage]. Forskarantologi. Stockholm: Justitiedepartementet