THE REPRODUCTION AND CHANGE OF MALE DOMINANCE IN POSITIONS OF POWER

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In Sweden, as in many other countries, most managers are men. In 1993 the Swedish government commissioned an inquiry2 in order to find out to what extent men dominated management positions in Swedish business life at the time. The study also focused on measures taken in order to increase the proportion of women at the top. The empirical material consisted of an extensive survey among organizations and interviews with people that worked with the issue of increasing women at executive levels (in the study referred to as change agents) (Höök 1995, Wahl 1995). Descriptions given by these agents supplemented the statistics from the survey and enhanced the picture of the work for change, which despite, or because of, men’s dominance at management level, still went on in many organizations. Nine years later a follow up inquiry3 was commissioned in order to once again measure the distribution of women and men at different organizational levels and the existence of work for change (see Regnö 2003a, 2003b). Once again, the change agents were interviewed (see Höök & Wahl 2003) in order to receive up-to-date descriptions of the work for change carried out by them, and their reflections on how the work has developed since the previous inquiry was carried through. In both government inquiries, the empirical findings were interpreted and discussed in relation to existing research on organization and gender.

This paper is based on the findings from the 2003 inquiry “Male Dominance in Transition. On Management Teams and Boards” (SOU 2003:16). In the first section of the paper, the empirical findings from the survey (Regnö 2003a, 2003b) and interviews with change agents (Höök & Wahl 2003) will be presented. Then, the more theoretical discussions following the themes of women executives in a historical perspective (Svanström 2003), women and corporate boards (Karlsson Stider 2003), management and gender

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2 SOU 1994:3 “Mäns föreställningar om kvinnor och chefskap” (published in English with the title “Men’s perceptions of women and management” (Wahl 1995)) included contributions by Anna Wahl and Pia Höök.
3 SOU 2003:16 “Mansdominans i förändring” (Male dominance in transition)
(Holgersson 2003a), young managers (Linghag 2003), and work for change (Höök 2003) will be summarized. The paper ends with a discussion drawing on the results of the different chapters.

Male dominance – in transition?
Both the 1994 inquiry (the survey was actually conducted in 1993 and published in English in 1995, see Wahl 1995) and the 2003 inquiry (the survey was conducted in 2002) show that men dominate management positions in organizations in the private sector in Sweden. The scope of male domination has, however, decreased during the nine years passing between the two studies. In 1994 the proportion of men in top executive groups were 94 per cent. 66 per cent of the organizations had top executive group with only men. 72 per cent of the organizations had only men on their board. In 2003, the proportion of men in top executive groups was 84 per cent. In 34 per cent of the organizations the top executives group consisted of men alone. Half of the organizations had only men on their boards. The change may also reflect other labor market changes since 1994, such as the privatization of sections of public activity with large proportions of women. Still, one can conclude that there has been a trend towards an increased proportion of women in leading positions since 1994.

Both surveys also show that organizations are engaged in efforts to bring about change, aiming to create a more even representation of men and women. In 1994, 58 per cent of the organizations said they were involved in work for equal opportunities between women and men. In 2003, this number has increased to 78 per cent. It has further emerged that gender equality work at organizations has grown in scope since that time. Half of the organizations in the study indicate that they regard the skewed gender distribution at managerial level as a problem, compared with just a third in 1993. In other words, this indicates an increased awareness of the men’s dominance in management positions as a problem. On the other hand, the 2003 survey shows that the proportion of women among young managers is low, and most of the change activities that are undertaken are of the type prescribed in the Equal Opportunities Act. Other kind of “voluntary” activities are uncommon. In terms of work for change, organizations seem to do what they are obliged to according to the law.

The picture which stands out in interviews with change agents (see Höök & Wahl 2003) can be summarized in saying that change agents work with roughly the same methods for change as in 1994: surveys, seminars,

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4 The Swedish Equal Opportunities Act may be said to possess two dimensions: one chiefly defensive and the other more proactive. The first aims at eliminating sex discrimination. The second concerns active promotion of gender equality, the taking of steps to encourage gender equality in organizations. The proactive dimension of the act makes it interesting from an international perspective since it does not restrict itself to prohibiting discrimination (defensive equal opportunities initiatives) (Pincus 1998).
management training, mentoring, networks and recruitment. However, new methods are mentioned in the 2003 inquiry: coaching, integration and books and awards. The addition of coaching, or supervision, can be interpreted in terms of work for change having become more focused on individuals. Integration can be interpreted as the work being made less of a side issue now compared to 1994. Awards and books can be interpreted as symbolic artifacts that through media affect public discourse to a greater or lesser extent.

Generally, the work for change has undergone certain transformation since 1993-1994 according to change agents taking part in the study. The two tendencies described by the agents deal with change at two different levels – partly at society level and partly at organization level. What is described at society level is greater awareness and visibility for the problem field, via both politics and media. At organization level what is described is reduced involvement in actual work for change. The majority of agents feel that total number of projects has decreased, which is partly interpreted as a result of gender equality as a specific term has become less visible through increasingly frequent integration into terms such as mainstreaming and diversity. Another, somewhat similar, interpretation, is that gender equality has quite simply become something self-evident, something which has already been achieved in Sweden. Several agents interpret reduced interest in projects in organizations as resulting from the belief that gender equality already exists and does not therefore need to be aimed for through work.

The approaches to the issue described by the change agents can be categorized on the basis of society discourse, companies, men and women. The picture that comes into focus is diverse. Differences exist between the levels: society, organization and individual. There are also differences between the categories women and men, and also differences within these categories. Society discourse is marked by politically correct statements, and at the same time the argument that “there are no women” is still heard. Company heads “know what to say” while at the same time less actual change work is conducted. Men’s approaches to the question vary according to position and age. The attitude of young men is more positive, or that gender equality is not a problem, say the agents. Resistance to change is, however, above all expressed by men. The agents describe women as generally more aware nowadays, though at the same time unawareness can be found among many young women.

The change agents further note that awareness of the existence and impact of a gender order is essential for change, but not enough. Gender awareness, especially among men, does not automatically imply a willingness to work for change. This picture differs slightly from that in the 1994 inquiry where much focus was put on the lack of awareness. The lack of will was also highlighted, but is not emphasized in the same
then as now. In the 2003 inquiry, the agents interpret top executives’ talk about gender combined with lack of action, i.e. paying lip service to the equal opportunities discourse, as a “new” type of resistance.

The results of gender equality initiatives mentioned in the 1994 inquiry, i.e. more women in senior positions, increased visibility of women, greater awareness of women and men, and changed perceptions are also mentioned by agents in the 2003 inquiry. The results are not however mentioned purely in harmonious terms. Also stressed by agents as resulting from work for change are women’s criticism of existing structures and women leaving organizations.

The change agents describe the main problems behind a continued skewed gender distribution at executive levels pertaining to gender structures in organizations and lack of knowledge as to how these are linked to working life in general, men’s unwillingness to work for change, plus gender equality having become “self-evident” and hence a “non-problem”. The majority of the agents are convinced that continued qualified work on a wide front is required. Two types of solutions recur in most interviews with the agents: increased awareness and legislation. Most change agents are positive towards action through legislation although none of them provide any detailed ideas as to how this could be formulated or implemented.

**Women executives in a historical perspective**

The 2003 inquiry shows a slight change towards an increased number of women on executive positions. However, these positions are still highly male dominated. How does this relate to women’s participation in executive teams and boards during the 20th century? What conclusions can be drawn from historical research on women and labor in Sweden?

In a review of research, Svanström (2003) shows that women have worked and run companies despite obstructive legislation. Both civil and labor legislation have rendered women’s participation in working life more difficult (cf. Widerberg 1980, Niskanen 2001). With the liberalization of legislation, perceptions of where women belong – married or single – in working life still remained. For example, only certain professions were seen fit for women, why their working conditions and wages also could differ from those of men (cf. Florin 1987, Wikander 1999). However, Svanström concludes, women have managed to circumvent legislation and run companies under these different premises. In order to earn their living, women have been forced to find ways to circumvent legislation and to demand access to knowledge from which they had been excluded. Women have for example taken over business from their deceased husbands, or started businesses within areas open to them. In other words, women have not had the same freedom of choice and opportunity as men on the labor market.
Svanström notes that research shows how the informal perceptions of society regarding gender have strong influence on women’s opportunities and, for example, have left their mark in explicit legislation. Perhaps the view of women as subordinate to men is shown most clearly in civil legislation, where married women as recently as 80 years ago did not have a majority status. Women have been active in other spheres and have in practice had control over companies despite being married (cf. Bladh 1991, 1997, Norlander 2000). However, for the same reason – obstructive legislation – they have been forced into labor-intensive areas and areas with low pay and low skill, after being excluded from education and training for so long.

Due to the limited research on women executives in a historical perspective, Svanström conducted a survey of women on the boards of limited companies in Sweden between 1918-1973 published in the 2003 inquiry. The historical survey is based on material from the Swedish Industrial Directory. The material is however very limited and not representative, and must thus be seen as a pilot study. Svanström’s findings are however clear-cut: women have played a minute role on boards during this period. Women appear to have had somewhat better opportunities to access boardrooms in family businesses.

According to Svanström’s survey the proportion of companies with at least one woman on the board increased during the period researched and reached a top in 1953 with 12 per cent. On average, there have been two to four men per woman in the boardroom, depending on board size. A larger board does however not imply more women board members, but rather more men. Women in executive positions are unusual during the period but increase somewhat in number in later decades.

A somewhat thought provoking observation is that the number of women board members appears to be greater during a period when women did not have a majority status according to law and when widows gained seats on boards as owners. In pace with women receiving majority status, the number of widows on boards diminishes and women appear to hold fewer positions of power.

Drawing on the above research findings, Svanström (2003) concludes that legislation for women’s opportunities in working life are important. Her discussion also shows how society’s gendered perceptions have an impact on legislation. However, history gives several examples of practice deviating from legislation in various directions since women for example have worked despite obstructive legislation. Sometimes formal rights exists but are not reflected in practice due to patriarchal perceptions. Finally, the findings show that ownership can be a women’s route to influence, even if it is not a self-evident route.
**Women and corporate boards**

As Svanström (2003) concludes, ownership has historically been a route to top positions. Is ownership still a way for women to enter boards? What other venues exist for women’s board membership? Karlsson Stider (2003) discusses two possible routes into Swedish corporate boardrooms. One route into the boardroom is as an owner or representative of other owners. Another route is top executive positions since members of the board are increasingly being recruited on the basis of experience as company executives. In her review of research on women and board membership, Karlsson Stider (2003) concludes that perceptions of women as inadequate is reproduced among men in the recruitment processes for board members (cf. Hultbom 1997, Pehrson 2001, Sjöstrand & Petrelius 2002).

Research focusing the relation between board and management team emphasizes the accountability of the board and the board’s role as supervisor (cf. Ward 1991, Neubauer & Lank 1998, Brodin et al 2000). Karlsson Stider discusses the relation between members of the board and executives in terms of homosociality (cf. Kanter 1977, Holgersson 2001) and raises the question of how a board can critically appraise and question company leadership if these are largely the same people, or people with very similar experience.

Karlsson Stider also finds that it is mainly family owned companies which construct women as competent owners since in these cases company owners are also constructed as competent *active* owners (cf. Karlsson Stider 2000). As an equal inheritance of company stock is increasingly applied in Sweden, more women are now owners. Thus, in this case women become board members because they have a family (are members of an owner family), not hindered because they have a family (have responsibility for care of their own family).

**Management and gender**

Management teams are almost as male dominated as corporate boards. Critical research on gender and management provides explanations for how such dominance is reproduced. A recurrent theme in this research is the link between perceptions of management and perceptions of men and masculinity (cf. Kanter 1977, Calás and Smircich 1991, Collinson and Hearn 1994, Roper 1994, Wahl 1998). As a result, women are other than exceptionally, only to be found in specific managerial posts. These positions are gendered as more female, and are not considered to lead to the top, for example HR-managers. Thus women continue to represent inadequacy or are considered supplementary. They are seen as deficient compared to the norm still represented by men (cf. Holgersson 2003b).
Homosociality is another theme in research on management and gender (cf. Lipman Blumen 1976, Kanter 1977, Roper 1996, Holgersson 2003b). Groups consisting of a majority of men can be seen as arenas for homosociality, and contribute to the perception of managers or company heads as a specific kind of man. These perceptions have an impact on practice, for example when recruiting chief executives. Homosociality produces a demand for men and not women – hence its significance in the present discourse on leadership where men continue to present themselves as genderless and self-evidently competent. Women only groups can also contribute to reproduce the gender order, but can – depending on context – also represent an arena for critical voices and thus a possible arena for change (for example Höök 2001).

Research suggests that low numbers of women managers is not experienced as a management problem, as long as male managers still see men as representatives of management and women at best as a complement. Male managers neither seeing nor conceding structural discrimination of women contribute to a defensive attitude toward various types of change activities aiming at changing organization rather than changing women.

In the 1994 inquiry, it was concluded that the scant experience of men managers working with women at the same level made disengagement possible between perceptions of women and perceptions of management. Thus their perceptions of women as inadequate remained. Research shows, however, that if men are given the opportunity of working in a more equal group then maintaining this approach becomes more difficult (cf. Wahl & Holgersson 2003). Thus gender distribution in managerial positions plays a role in how management is constructed (cf. Wahl 2001).

**Young managers**

A recurrent theme in the societal discourse on gender is that young people are more egalitarian in terms of gender and therefore equal opportunities will be achieved once the new generation of managers is established in organizations. Equality is therefore seen as a generational issue rather than an issue of power. Is this perception confirmed in research on gender and career and young managers? A review of this field of research made by Linghag (2003) shows that a gender division is already made at the start of a management career. This is also reflected in the empirical findings in the 2003 inquiry that show that gender distribution of young managers 35 years old and younger in private sector, was 25 per cent women and 75 per cent men. This does not correspond to gender distribution among the total number of employees within the sector. Thus, the chances of gaining the “right” experience and competence for senior management positions are unevenly distributed between men and women already at an initial phase.
Research shows that young men and women have different perceptions regarding career opportunities and ambitions (cf. Sundin 1998, Eriksson 2000). A common perception among men is that women do not want to advance or become managers. Men also tend to a further extent to see family as a hindrance – as a hindrance for women. Women instead point at hindrances they see in organizations and express a critical attitude toward career conditions (cf. Asplund 1988, Franzén 1995, Höök 2001). Research also shows that organizations see women’s responsibility as clear-cut, while men’s responsibility is presumed subordinate to organizational interests. This is expressed in organizations adapting in different ways to the parenthood of women and men (cf. Benschop & Doorwaard 1998, Höök 2001, Bekkengen 2002). Further, research shows that resistance toward women as colleagues and to gender equality tends to be strongest where women represent an immediate competitive threat, which is mainly at lower and intermediate levels in organizations (cf. Kvande & Rasmussen 1994, Sundin 1998).

The perceptions that young managers have of working conditions, career and career strategies – e.g. working large amounts of unpaid overtime, or the different attitudes of women and men to family and children – can be seen as an adaptation to established gendered structures in organizations (cf. Linghag 2002). These young managers reproduce the norms and values of top managers, leading to the reproduction both of gendered perceptions of management and organizational structures.

Linghag (2003) concludes that the tendency to harbor expectations that organizations will change by themselves simply because a younger generation of managers is establishing itself is over-rated. Furthermore, a view of gender equality as a generational issue hides the fact that increased equal opportunities in society and organizations is a result of work for change in the past. Not acknowledging this work for change can have repercussions on how current and future needs of work for change are assessed.

**Work for change**

Despite of, or maybe because of, men’s persistent dominance on top levels, work for change seems to be taking place in many organizations. According to the 2003 survey (Regnö 2003) work for equal opportunities has increased. However, interviews with change agents point towards another development. According to these change agents fewer equal opportunities’ projects are initiated. How the results from the survey and interviews with change agents relate to other studies on equal opportunities and management?

In a review of these studies, Höök (2003) finds that a recurrent theme is that of resistance. Gender equality initiatives in organizations activate resistance, above all among men (cf. Chafetz 1990, Cockburn 1991, Hagberg et al 1995, Höök 2001). The attitudes of men and women to the work can be understood from their
stance on the gender order. Men’s resistance can be understood as logical from a power perspective – they earn more, do less unpaid work in the home and have higher status in society. So men often interpret gender equality as something they stand to lose by.

Both support for, and opposition, to gender equality exists in active and passive forms (cf. Pincus 2002). The work faces both cultural and institutional obstacles, which in practice means both structures and symbolic aspects can appear obstructive to change (cf. Cockburn 1991). Resistance also exists within the framework of gender equality initiatives by their creating arenas for men’s homosocial interaction, such has been observed in studies of mentoring programs. One form of resistance is the care and tolerance shown towards other men’s resistance by women and men who say they themselves are positive towards gender equality (cf. Höök 2001, Sundin 2002).

Gender equality initiatives in practice involve complex and contradictory processes of change (cf. Itzin & Newman 1995). Their dilemma and challenge is that they aim to change existing conditions within the framework of existing conditions. Thus identifying a best method or proper procedure is not possible. Those organizations that have witnessed results from their work, are those that have tested several different methods simultaneously and where “failures” have been allowed without the issue being written off (cf. Wahl 1995). More important than methods employed is company management’s support for change.

Anglo-Saxon research has discussed gender equality initiatives as either liberal or radical (cf. Jewson & Mason 1986). Liberal gender equality work focuses on processes and procedures whilst radical gender equality work focuses on outcome. In practice the majority of gender equality initiatives contain both liberal and radical elements. Liberal initiatives, such as management training for women, have been criticized for adapting women to a male norm (cf. Marshall 1994, Gatenby & Humphries 1999). Depending on context and content, management can also be understood as a consciousness-raising process, and thus a radical method (cf. Höök 2001).

Höök (2003) argues that the discourse on diversity, which has primarily evolved in Anglo-Saxon countries and later been imported to Sweden, is a result of the deficiencies of a largely liberal approach to gender equality. This discourse means that gender no longer needs to be denied, that differences are acknowledged and evaluated (cf. Ely & Meyerson 1999). It is a way – at least in theory – of highlighting and questioning the norm as general and objective. The diversity discourse contains, however, pitfalls since structures are individualized and not problematized (cf. Liff 1999, Rutherford 1999, Sinclair 2000, Abrahamsson 2002).
Another recurrent theme in research on equal opportunities and management is the impact of gender awareness on the change process. Gender awareness influences the discourse in organizations – the way in which women and men can talk about the importance of gender and equality initiatives, and how women can understand and express experiences of gender discrimination (cf. Rutherford 1999, Höök 2001). For women, gender awareness can create a will for change, which is not necessarily the case for men. Women and men interpret knowledge differently depending on their respective power positions in the gender order. Thus change is not only about gender awareness but also about power and will for change (cf. Höök 2001).

Gender equality initiatives have to face a discrepancy between rhetoric and practice. On a rhetorical level, the majority is positive towards gender equality, while routinely men are the norm in organizations (cf. Hagberg et al 1995, Lindgren 1999). Höök (2003) concludes that this discrepancy between words and action can be interpreted as both resistance and as an integral part of the change process where awareness precedes action.

**Concluding discussion**

In sum, the new empirical findings and theoretical discussions along the themes – women executives in a historical perspective women and corporate boards, management and gender, young managers, and work for change – shows that men’s dominance in executive positions persists in large private sector organizations although there are tendencies pointing towards an increase in the proportion of women in executive positions since 1993. The increase can partially be interpreted as part of a changed labor market, which has had an influence on both population and selection in this survey. It might also be worth reflecting on the fact that the period in question has undergone economic downturn, something that often contributes to decline in the position of women. Perhaps positive change took place despite difficult economic times?

The findings also show that work for change in organizations continues. According to the survey, the scope of gender equality initiatives in organizations has increased. According to the change agents, initiatives aiming at increasing the number of women managers have decreased and the initiatives have changed in terms of methods and approaches since 1993. Looking at the more general discourse on equal opportunities in society and women managers, it appears that both support for change and resistance against change has increased. It would seem that increased visibility in the public arena has, paradoxically, contributed to the issue becoming more invisible in organizations.

In the 1994 inquiry, the consequences of the lack of gender awareness among men in power positions was highlighted and critically analyzed. The 2003 inquiry concludes that increased awareness is not enough for change to take place. Awareness does not necessarily result in action if there is no willingness to change.
However, increased awareness in organizations generally puts the issue on the agenda. With awareness comes a language for describing and questioning the present gender order.

Is it possible to see a more positive interpretation where women are currently looked at as more competent in organizations? This is hard to decide. It appears that women in family businesses are more often constructed as competent for executive posts. However, men’s dominance confirms perceptions of women as inadequate in relation to executive positions. Women have less influence than men when defining competence in this context. Women are still judged as deficient compared to the norm. The same tendencies are also found among young managers in a new generation of executives.

Changes often provoke resistance. The findings show a complex picture with both increased support for the issue and increased resistance. Some of the findings point towards the issue receiving more attention at society level now compared to 1993. More “talk” is also considered to exist in organizations, though not necessarily linked to “action”. How might this discrepancy felt between talk and action be interpreted? One interpretation is that it represents a new form of resistance to change. Another is that it instead is an essential part of the change process, where talk must precede action by a certain time margin.

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