



The 'paradox' of working in the world's most equal countries

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When Bolette Wrestroem moved back to Denmark after spending most of her twenties overseas, she was excited to experience the “gender equality” for which the Nordic region is globally famous. At first, she wasn’t disappointed.

“I definitely think Denmark is more open-minded than all the other places I have lived,” says the 28-year-old, now a community manager for a Copenhagen start-up. “There is more focus on what you are capable of, instead of your gender.”

But amid immersion in a culture that seemed to actively champion women’s rights, she couldn’t escape the fact that there were still “primarily white males sitting at the top” of many of the best-known companies. Denmark’s global image, versus the reality, “didn’t always match up”.

It is a paradox that many women working in the Nordics will recognise.

The region has a glowing reputation as the best place in the world when it comes to gender equality, thanks to welfare states that support working families and promote parental leave, and legal, political and cultural support for the goal of gender equality.

But many experts argue that progress has flatlined, suggesting these countries are further from achieving equality than global observers might imagine.

“We do have the idea of being gender equal...but we have a long way to go before we *are* gender equal,” argues Anneli Häyren, a researcher at the Centre for Gender Research at Uppsala University in Sweden. “I think it will take quite a lot of time - another 50 years at least - until we get there - and that is only if we keep working at it.”

Glass ceilings

Strong progress has been made in the public sector; in Sweden **more women than men currently hold management positions** in this sphere. In politics, 46% of Swedish members of parliament are women, while the proportion in other Nordic countries is around 40%.

However, there are still surprisingly few women in senior private sector roles. Just 28% of managers in Denmark are female, rising to 32% in Finland and Norway, and 36% in Sweden, according to a report by independent think tank **The Cato Institute** in 2018. Iceland is the highest-scoring Nordic country, with 40%. But that is still three points behind the US, where

43% of managers are women, despite the US ranking just 51 in the **World Economic Forum**'s Gender Gap index.

Strong concerns about this disparity were raised last year in *The Nordic Gender Effect at Work*, a **report from the Nordic Council of Ministers**, an advisory body. The writers found “a troubling pattern” in businesses - “the higher up the hierarchy you look, the more men you will see”.

“It feels more equal than in the US, because people are more focused and consistent in talking about the topic...But I am not sure they are always held accountable in terms of upholding those ideals,” agrees Dani Nguyen, 31, an executive recruiter based in the Swedish capital who previously worked in Silicon Valley.

When it comes to pay, the difference between gross average hourly earnings of male and female employees in Denmark, Iceland and Norway is only slightly below the **EU average of 16%**. In Finland the figure creeps to 16.7%. Sweden comes out best with 12.3%, but still lags behind Luxembourg, Italy and Romania, which all manage a pay gap of 5% or less.

Meanwhile, women in the Nordics trail their male counterparts in attracting investment for new businesses. Only 1% of investments registered in the **Nordic Tech List database** last year went to companies headed solely by female founders, according to figures analysed by Swedish business news site **DI Digital**.

“It is definitely a problem,” says **Rikke Eckhoff Høvdning**, CEO of industry body The Norwegian Venture Capital and Private Equity Association (NVCA). “It is easier to get VC funding if you are male. We have had this discussion a lot in the last few years and everyone is asking ‘what we can do next?’.”

Why has progress stalled?

Gender experts and campaigners are at odds over why the region continues to face these disparities.

One common explanation is that women are more likely than men to choose public sector careers. This contributes to the pay gap (public sector jobs tend to pay less) and limits the pool of female talent available for top private sector roles. But the reasons women tend to pick these careers remain up for debate.

Last year, **researchers in the US and UK** found that countries with an existing culture of gender equality have an even smaller proportion of women taking degrees in science, technology and mathematics (STEM).

“It is a paradox ... nobody would have expected this to be the reality of our time,” says Professor Gijsbert Stoet, one of the report's authors.

He argues that since Nordic countries have a generally high standard of living and strong welfare states, young women are free to pick careers based on their own interests, which he says are often more likely to include working in care-giving roles or with languages. By contrast, high achievers in less stable economies might choose STEM careers based on the income and security they provide, even if they prefer other areas.

“Girls and boys are different, and have different preferences on the whole,” he argues. He believes too much media focus is placed on the lack of women in CEO positions, since these account for such a small proportion of jobs overall, and suggests that more men fill these roles since “the personality traits and ambition to be important and famous is higher in men than women”.

But others strongly believe that social conditioning is the major driver when it comes to women’s career choices and promotion opportunities, and stress that gender stereotypes persist.

“I don’t think it’s about choice, it’s about structures ... to say it’s about choice is to ‘blame the victim’,” says Anneli Häyren at the Centre for Gender Research at Uppsala University.

She argues that men remain better paid due to a greater value being placed on management positions and in certain sectors, such as tech and science, which are “male-gendered”, in contrast to “female-gendered” jobs focused on caregiving. She says men in professions like preschool teaching or nursing usually find it easier to climb these career ladders than women entering “male-gendered” areas. “It is a waterproof sign of how strong the patriarchy is,” she argues.

Häyren also rejects the idea that women in the Nordics are less ambitious than men. “Research suggests it is often a strategic decision not to apply for certain roles... Women do want (it), but they realise that they won’t get it.”

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Work-life balance

Juggling a career with family life remains a challenge for some women in the Nordics, despite policies like **subsidised childcare** and **flexible working hours** encouraging couples to share parenting.

While Nordic fathers do take more parental leave than anywhere else in the world, the gender split of parenting labour remains far from equal. In Iceland and Sweden - which have the most generous policies - almost 30% of leave is taken by fathers, while in Norway the figure is just over 19%, and the proportion drops to 11% in Denmark and Finland, according to ***The Nordic Gender Effect at Work*** report.

The report also flags two ongoing challenges; women are more likely to work part-time and they invest more hours in housework or caring for elderly relatives than men. Many who can afford help choose not to, because there is a degree of stigma attached to outsourcing household chores in Scandinavia. Even the region’s most high-profile influencer and businesswoman, **Isabella Löwengrip**, faced criticism when she hired a personal assistant after divorcing her husband.

“Men are more active in family life...But women still feel split between work and home and being a good parent - even though we are not in the 1950s anymore,” reflects **Anette Tvedergaard Madsen**, 45, who has three children and holds a senior marketing role at one of Denmark’s largest banks.

Madsen argues that most Nordic companies recognise the benefits of a diverse workforce and its importance when it comes to employer branding. “You want to be a modern organisation and an

attractive workplace by creating diversity - not only male and female but also different nationalities,” she says.

But the marketing strategist believes that unconscious biases can affect senior hiring decisions.

“Men are definitely not trying to avoid women in top positions,” she argues, but “who they know best and who is sitting next to them” continues to play a role, as well as protecting their own reputations.

Stockholm-based recruiter Dani Nguyen agrees. “Even in Sweden there is something of an ‘old boys club’, she argues. “The corporate environment has been built by white men and for white men.”

What can be done?

Campaigners are proposing a wide range of solutions to move forward, including calls for individual company targets for senior managers or nationwide quotas. “If this isn’t a KPI (key performance indicator) the business is held accountable for, it becomes a side hobby and side hobbies aren’t always invested in financially or time wise,” argues Nguyen.

But critics of fixed targets argue that the concept could devalue the way women hired under this regime are perceived in the workplace. Danish start-up community manager Bolette Wrestroem says quotas, while potentially a “good stepping-stone”, could also suggest that “women are only there because it is required and not because of their skills or capabilities”.

Quotas for board members have already been introduced on a nationwide scale in Norway and Iceland. But as ***The Nordic Gender Effect at Work*** report points out, improvements at board level have not led to a jump in the number of women CEOs or managers. “One reason for this is that the business world is characterised by a wide range of leadership standards and traits that are typically (perhaps stereotypically) associated with men,” it concludes.

Nguyen says she has placed several women in high positions in Swedish head offices who ended up leaving because they felt they needed to adapt too much to be heard. “The most important step is creating an environment where people of different backgrounds, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality, feel empowered and supported to do their best,” she argues. “We cannot just hire females and minorities and expect them to figure it out.”

Many campaigners argue that educating male employees on the benefits of diversity should be more prominent. Numerous **global studies** have concluded that there is a positive correlation between the presence of women in leadership roles and an organisation's performance.

The chief executive of Heba, a Stockholm rental company **named-and-shamed** for low male-female diversity, recently made headlines for admitting he hadn’t thought about the advantages of having more women managers until his top executive team achieved gender balance.

"I thought competence was the main thing - competence and attitude - not sex, but I've changed my mind. The workplace works better because of the [gender] mix," Lennart Karlsson **told the BBC** shortly afterwards. "The discussion climate is better, you have a better conversation and a better understanding for each other."

In Norway, a private equity firm criticised for a lack of female managers recently introduced a policy making it **mandatory for all fathers** to take at least two months' parental leave, or risk losing their bonus, to help reduce **unconscious bias**.

“If I am a female and I look at the male team members around me becoming fathers and none of them take any parental leave, I will feel that I am an outlier when I get pregnant and I need my parental leave,” says Chief Operating Officer Morten Welø. “So we thought - ‘let’s turn this around’, and say it’s mandatory regardless of gender.”

He says the policy also sends “an important signal” that he hopes will encourage more young female graduates to consider the company. “To attract the best talent, we need better diversity.”

More companies are also experimenting with digital platforms designed to help tackle unconscious biases. Tengai, the world's first robot designed to carry out unbiased job interviews, is being **tested by major Swedish recruitment firm TNG**. In Norway, **Equality Check**, a community-based platform of employee reviews rating equality in companies (similar to the English-language Glassdoor platform), has become a popular tool for both applicants and HR professionals.

“Big funds have also become a lot more aware of how they write job descriptions - what words you use and how do you conduct the interview processes,” adds **Rikke Eckhoff Høvdning** at the Norwegian Venture Capital and Private Equity Association (NVCA). “I would say no-one knows the answers, so we need to try different things, readjust and think of something new if it doesn’t work.”

Finding role models

On a political level, all the Nordic governments are working to tackle the gender gap.

Last year Iceland became the first country in the world to require companies with 25 or more workers to **demonstrate that they pay men and women equally for the same work**, with daily fines for firms that fail to do so.

Finland’s new **Working Hours Act**, due to come into force in 2020, will give the majority of full-time employees the right to decide when and where they work for at least half of their working hours, in a move designed to **help boost flexibility**.

Initiatives in Sweden include the recent launch of the **Gender Equality Agency**, designed to promote better coordination on the issue, and **coding lessons for children**, partly aimed at tackling early biases in terms of tech-based career choices.

Meanwhile, many campaigners agree that grassroots efforts designed to empower women on an individual level remain essential. “Role models are really important. It’s hard to be what you can’t see,” argues **Rikke Eckhoff Høvdning**. “But you can visualise a career path and take risks if you see others who have taken that path.”

She says that the start-up community in Scandinavia is already making strides in this area, through meet-ups, conferences and networking events targeting the gender gap. “Female founders are very keen to promote other female founders,” she argues.

Two successful Swedish female entrepreneurs - Charlotte Sundåker and Linda Waxin - recently launched **Ownershift**, an independent think tank designed to expand discussions about gender

equality to include ownership and risk-taking. In Sweden, men still own roughly double what women own in terms of capital, land, real estate, forests and natural resources.

“We think that if more women create their own structures and companies, the overall structure will change into more empathic systems,” says Sundåker.

Staying in the spotlight

For Anneli Häyren, at the Centre for Gender Research in Uppsala, a key goal is simply to ensure that public discussions about gender equality continue, both in Nordic nations and on a global scale.

“On some level it really hit the brakes,” she says of public discourse in recent years. “Quite a lot of people think we have discussed it enough and it is a dead debate.”

But she believes that raising awareness of the ongoing challenges in Sweden and the Nordics is essential, so that the region can pick up the pace of change and continue to inspire the world.