

# Head Teachers, Women and Hesitation to Discuss Gender Issues

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore how a group of Swedish head teachers approaches the importance of gender issues in terms of their work. The empirical material is from so-called “research circles”, which were part of a gender equality project conducted in southern Sweden. A research circle is similar to a focus group interview. The group, which consists of eight women who were head teachers within compulsory education, met on six occasions. The results show that the women initially expressed strong hesitation about whether discussing gender issues in relation to the role of head teacher was beneficial at all. The entire gender equality project was called into question by the suggestion that the connection between head teacher and gender implied a weakening of women. However, examples of gender playing a role within educational settings were increasingly noted. By highlighting female head teachers’ ambivalence towards discussing issues related to gender and gender equality, this paper contributes to the discussion about why these issues do not occupy a stronger position within schools. Also, the female head teachers’ hesitation and ambivalence are connected to the decline in status of the head teacher profession due to the restructuring of education, for which women in educational leadership in Sweden have been blamed.

## Keywords

Women Educational Administrators, Educational Leadership, Head Teachers, Gender Issues, Gender Equality Policy

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores how a group of female head teachers approaches gender issues related to their job. As women within a profession which has comprised primarily of men for a long time, they can be seen as having a special position. As early as the late 1960s, Swedish schools were given a clear mandate regarding

gender issues. The curriculum from 1969 declared that gender equality was to be promoted by encouraging the students in schools to debate and question men's and women's different tasks in society [1]. Schools were requested to challenge and counteract gender stereotypes and provide a more multifaceted picture of reality. The "sex-role issue" was to be discussed; it should "be put in its psychological, social and economic context" (p. 50, translation from Swedish). Later curricula have stated similar policies.

The role of Swedish schools in terms of raising awareness of how an unequal gender order is recreated, and changing society in a more gender equal direction, is frequently emphasised in government investigations, bills, curricula and other school policy documents. In this context the head teacher's role as leader of the school and thereby in charge of operations is stressed. The large number of women who now have positions as head teachers is deemed to be an advantage for schools' gender equality work. Nevertheless, it is often found that gender issues do not have a prominent place within schools [2] [3].

The present paper contributes to the discussion about why these issues do not occupy a stronger position within schools. Also, the findings are discussed in relation to the restructuring of education in line with New Public Management.

Below, the empirical and theoretical framework is presented. Next I describe the method and the research questions. Then there follows a description of how the head teachers in this study approach gender issues. Finally, I will discuss the results.

## 2. Empirical and Theoretical Framework

Historically, it was considered natural for head teachers to be men. Girls' schools certainly often had women in their management, but for a long time it was unusual to have women as head teachers in schools with students and teachers of both genders [4] [5] [6].

During the 1970s and 1980s, discussions started concerning the low proportion of women within the head teacher profession as a problem in many countries. The focus was on women and it was common for explanations to be based on women being inadequate in some respect. In the discussions there were two main explanations, namely that female teachers had poor self-confidence and therefore did not dare to apply for head teacher assignments, and that due to family responsibilities women did not want to advance their careers. These explanations were based on the educational organisation being gender neutral [7] [8]. Other explanations were related to discrimination and male teachers mainly being given support and encouragement for promotion [7] [9]. During the 1990s there were increasing calls for so-called "female leadership". Talk of female leadership was often based on a binary division between "female" and "male". In contrast to men, who were claimed to be rational, analytical and focused on their assignment, women were assumed to be emotional, intuitive and focused on relationships [10]. It was also emphasised that women who were head teachers were concerned about a positive work environment for both staff and pupils [11]

[12].

However, many studies which investigated gender differences among head teachers did not find that women and men exercised their school leadership in different ways [13]. There was criticism of the notion that women exercised a special female leadership [10] [14]. Other criticism entailed that many studies were based on gender-blind organisational and leadership theories, theories which did not problematize what femininities and masculinities means for things like perceptions of authority, performance assessment and work division [8]. Researchers have questioned the meaningfulness of assuming that men and women are two separate but mutually homogeneous groups [14]. Studies which instead focus on the social practices which create uneven patterns within the educational system show how notions concerning femininities and masculinities, as well as notions of “whiteness”, act in these processes [15]. Research from the gender theoretical field has shown how leadership has strong connections to men and masculinity. This gendering of leadership often results in expectations of the manager being a man [10].

Sweden has an international reputation for being a country that has come a long way in terms of gender equality [16] [17]. Also, gender equality is a component in the Swedish self-image [18] [19] [20]. Gender issues were established on the political agenda in the 1970s and since then a series of reforms aimed at increasing equality between women and men have been implemented, such generous parental leave for both fathers and mothers and innumerable projects with the goal of bringing about a more gender-balanced labour market [21] [22].

In Swedish schools, a very large number of local and national gender equality initiatives and projects have been carried out since the 1970s. They have to a large extent been aimed at getting students to make gender-atypical educational choices. Above all, the aim has been to get girls to choose differently. The focus has been directed at girls and not against norms and conventions. In this way gender issues within the school have conveyed that it is the female students that must change. In terms of gender issues, girls have been associated with deficiency and problems [23].

In the 1970s the gender distribution among Swedish head teachers was highlighted as a major problem. A large majority of head teachers were men. Many municipalities did not have any women working as head teachers at all [24]. One cause of this was an informal recruitment system. The temporary positions which comprised qualifications for head teacher roles were not advertised openly but were procured through personal contacts with head teachers, and the attitude towards women as head teachers was negative [25] [26]. During the 1990s the number of female head teachers increased quickly in connection with major reorganisations which resulted in the number of head teachers increasing dramatically [27]. In Wingård's [27] study of women who worked as head teachers within compulsory education during the latter half of the 1990s, it was frequently expressed that men largely refrain from applying for head teacher positions. The women felt sorry about this; they would have liked to have men as head

teacher colleagues [28]. A similar reasoning is provided in Lindvert's [29] interview study with both women and men who work as head teachers. They say that it is tragic that schools are becoming a woman's organisation. Söderberg Forslund [30] summarises the development: "The long discussed problem of having too few female head teachers has changed during the 1990s to becoming a problem of having too many female head teachers" (p. 76, translated from Swedish). During the 2000s women were in the majority. In 2013 more than two-thirds of head teachers within compulsory education were women [31]. Consequently, as the Swedish head teacher profession has changed from male dominated to female dominated and for those within the profession, gender issues can be deemed to be particularly notable [32].

As many studies have discussed, management principles often referred to as New Public Management, with clients, markets and auditing as key concepts, have gained ground in most developed countries [33] [34] [35]. The restructuring of education in line with New Public Management has led to an increased workload for education managers and at the same time the profession's status has been lowered [35]. This has also affected head teachers in Swedish schools. Moreover, this in turn has led to female school leadership being associated with several negative aspects since the proportion of women within the head teacher profession started to increase. Women are associated with an unfavourable salary trend, lower professional status and a negative development for schools [26].

Since the gender distribution of head teachers has shifted, one may expect the previous connections with masculinity to diminish. However, despite a majority of school leaders now being women, there has been no transformation of the symbolic image of head teachers. Kimmel [36] uses the expression *culture lag*; society is changing but old notions of what is female and male persist. The gendered associations and beliefs associated with a profession or a job are not necessarily a reflection of reality [37]. In this context, Connell [38] talks about gender relations, meaning that some things are gendered feminine and others are gendered masculine due to a binary division with historical roots. Because of this binary split, the true distribution of traits, behaviour, etc. is forced into a simplified gender model and as a result women and men are often perceived as "naturally" different, with totally different traits and behaviour. The active man and the passive woman are an example of this binary thinking.

Within Connell's theory of gender dynamics, four gender dimensions are highlighted: *symbolic*, *production*, *emotional* and *power*. In reality, the dimensions overlap, but they can be distinguished analytically. *The symbolic dimension* refers to all ideas related to the gender categories. The categories "woman" and "man" are part of a cultural, historical and thus socially created web of notions, agreements and expectations. Care and feelings are for example gendered feminine, while logic and reason are gendered masculine. *The production dimension* refers to the division of labour based on gender, *i.e.* how tasks, occupations, workplaces and so on are gendered. For instance, caring for children and teaching in schools are categorised as feminine, whereas educational leadership is ca-

tegorised as masculine [39] [40]. *The emotional dimension* includes feelings and emotional commitment of gendered character. For instance, men are usually allowed to express anger in a way that does not apply to women, whereas it is more acceptable for women to express grief. Moreover, feelings concerning gender norms can be very strong, and violation of gender norms may evoke hostile reactions. *The power dimension* refers to the hierarchical relation between genders, *i.e.* men and aspects associated with masculinity are ascribed a higher status than women and aspects associated with femininity. This can also be seen in the default/norm position men hold in language and society. The supposedly gender neutral “person”, for instance, frequently refers to a man [41]. In spite of this pattern, which is still seen on a general level, there is a widespread claim that gender norms and gender patterns have had their day, and are no longer valid. According to this belief, gender equality has been achieved. Men’s and women’s living conditions and positions are merely a matter of individual choice, it is maintained [42]. Not least in the Nordic countries, with the self-image that is presented e.g. in political situations, claiming that the Nordic countries are world champions when it comes to gender equality, the idea that gender norms are outdated and it is now all about the individual, is a widespread opinion [19].

### 3. Method and Research Questions

This is a qualitative study of how eight Swedish head teachers approach gender issues. The empirical material is from so-called “research circles”, which were part of a gender equality project conducted by a medium-sized municipality in southern Sweden. Six research circles were conducted during the spring of 2010. The research circles have their roots in the Swedish study circle tradition, which involves a group gathering regularly for a short or long period of time to engage in a shared interest or to discuss a specific subject. A shared issue is discussed in the research circles. A researcher participates for clarification purposes and to serve as a resource, for example, by structuring the discussions [43]. In this manner a research circle is similar to a focus group interview [44]. For the municipal gender equality project six groups of head teachers met six times, and I participated as researcher in one of the groups. The aim of the research circles which were conducted was to discuss the head teacher role. Eight persons who were head teachers within the educational system participated in the group with me. The oldest was born in 1948 and the youngest in 1974. They worked as head teachers within compulsory education and all were women. Education in Sweden is compulsory between the ages of 7 and 16. The vast majority of schools are run by the municipality, but there are also publicly funded independent schools. The schools that the head teachers in this study were responsible for were all run by the municipality and had an average of approximately 500 students. The discussions were held very freely based on which issues related to the head teacher role participants considered as being important to discuss. My role as research circle leader was to assist the participants to maintain a focus on head teacher issues and to pay attention to the gender perspective which could be relevant.

Each discussion lasted for one and a half hours. I took notes. Shortly after each meeting, a clean copy of the notes was produced and sent to each participant. They then had the opportunity to clarify their comments or provide other viewpoints. When all six meetings had been conducted, a summary of the discussions which had taken place was produced. This was also sent to the participants for viewpoints and approval. Taking part in the municipal gender equality project was not optional. All head teachers in the municipality had to take part. After completion of the project, however, the participants in “my” group were contacted about voluntary participation in this study to which they all agreed, *i.e.* they gave me their permission to use the material from the research circles in this study. The research circles were conducted in Swedish. For this article quotes have been translated to English. In this study, the research questions are:

- How do head teachers approach gender issues related to the head teacher role?
- In which ways are dominant gender norms challenged or recreated in their approaches?

The data analysis was conducted by reading the empirical material several times, initially with the first research question in focus. Both similarities and differences in the head teachers’ discussions were searched for. Two different approaches to gender issues related to head teachers’ role were identified and they are presented in the next section. These approaches, or themes, are then discussed in relation to the second research question with the help of the empirical and theoretical framework.

## 4. Head Teachers and Gender issues

The results show that initially there was strong hesitation among the head teachers regarding whether gender plays any role in the meeting between people nowadays, and whether it was beneficial at all to discuss gender issues in relation to the head teacher role. However, gradually the discussions became less sceptical and there were many examples of how gender issues are relevant for head teachers. These discussions are described below.

### 4.1. Gender Does Not Play Any Role

Initially there was dissociation from the idea that gender plays any role within Swedish schools and for head teachers’ jobs. The focus was put on their staff. Teachers and whether there were any differences between female and male teachers were discussed. For instance, taking care of the dishes in the staff room was commented on. When female teachers took that responsibility, it was assumed to be a matter of choice, personality or generation.

The possibility that head teachers themselves treated men and women differently seemed to be an unfamiliar thought. Nor did they think that gender played any role in terms of how they were treated by others. “*When the focus is on gender things go wrong. It is all about individuals*” was one opinion which was presented. Some emphasised that it was about the body and how you look. A person who is tall was assumed to inspire respect, regardless of whether the per-

son was a woman or man: *“Size makes a difference. Whether you are tall and large or a shorter person.”* One head teacher claimed that head teachers may be treated in different ways, but then it is about the educational settings they are responsible for. She described how she was treated in a better manner when she moved from being a head at a preschool to a compulsory school.

Another viewpoint which was presented was that you should not care if you are treated badly: *“If I have been treated badly then I have thought that this reflects on the person doing this to me. I have not let it affect me”*. There was also a concern that focus on gender could result in negative consequences. *“I have always felt that I am good enough”*, one of the head teachers emphasised.

The entire gender equality project was questioned due to the connection between head teacher and gender implying a weakening of women. *“I did not think about gender before, but now I have started thinking about it. Is that good? I want to leave here feeling stronger, not the opposite”*, one of the head teachers explained. *“I have always thought that I am worth as much as men”*, said another.

As the quote above illustrates, several statements were made which show that the informants opposed gender playing any role in terms of how they were treated as head teachers. An implicit starting point seems to be that a focus on gender implies that as women they are not adequate enough. Despite the fact that there are now many women in management positions in schools, several studies have showed that women within the head teacher profession are forced to deal with frequent expectations that the head teacher will be a man [5] [45] [46]. The head teacher in this study who fears that a focus on gender has a weakening effect clarifies the cultural notions of women having the “wrong” gender in relation to school leadership.

## 4.2. Gender Plays a Role

However, examples of gender playing a role within the educational settings increasingly emerged. Previous research has shown that the link between leadership and men/masculinity and the fact that women do not conform to that image means that women have additional issues to deal with. The inadequate conformity arouses expectations and notions which women in management positions must address [8]. An experience which was presented was that people still point out that the head teacher is a woman, as if this is strange or unusual. Head teachers said that it was particularly common at schools for older children and with many male teachers that the female gender of the head teacher was commented on. At a workplace where there were two head teachers and both were women, this was highlighted as something special:

*Despite the fact that so many women are educational leaders now, you can hear people emphasise that at this place we have two female head teachers. In some way it is still not natural for this to be the case.*

The women also had experiences of being treated in a condescending manner. Male managers could have an arrogant approach. Some men in managerial posi-

tions within the municipal organisation highlighted in different ways that they did not really take female colleagues seriously; they had a condescending attitude towards women, who were seen as incompetent. The experience of being treated as incompetent is also described in other studies of women who are head teachers [11] [27] [47]. In this study it was also discussed how parents might not respect the communication they receive: *“A mother may call about something she did not get approval for. A while later the father will call and expect that he will get a different and more positive answer.”*

The group returned to the additional demands placed on women in school leadership. An example given involved a situation where a woman among the employees had requested leave and her request was turned down. The reply had not been accepted. Instead, the head teacher and her motives were questioned. If the head had instead been a man, he and his motive would not have been contested in the same way, said the person who recounted the situation.

One of the head teachers maintained that the staff did not listen to her. She was pondering whether or not this was because her leadership was female. While some wanted to highlight *“female leadership”* and compare it to *“male leadership”*, others disassociated themselves from the method of dividing up qualities and leadership styles in this manner [48].

One experience was that the notion of *“female leadership”* tended to be accompanied by further tasks, which was not always desirable. One head teacher said that her staff expected her to be involved in decorating and to ensure that the staff rooms looked nice. However, she did not think that this type of task was part of the head teacher role. Staff also expected female head teachers to be a *“mother”* for the staff. The informants claimed that male colleagues were not subjected to these requirements. One of the head teachers described the expectations of employees:

*I am supposed to keep track of how everyone is, and ask “How are you doing?” I can’t understand why you expect these kinds of things from your boss in this day and age. Why do these expectations exist? Why do they think that I should keep track of how people, who may be in different buildings, are doing?*

The leadership that some of the group associated with female leadership was described in terms of being a mother instead of the boss. The head teacher continued: *“I want to get rid of expectations of me sewing curtains, fixing things and being a mother for the staff.”*

## 5. Discussion

The head teachers in the study have an ambivalent approach to gender issues and their significances for the head teacher role. They both challenge and sustain dominant gender norms. By being women they challenge the notion that the head teacher is a man and initially they expressed dissociation from the idea that gender plays any role. However, paradoxically dominant gender norms can be strengthened due to this approach, especially when it is connected to underlying notions of women not measuring up. In the discussions there were many examples of gender playing a role for the head teacher profession. Despite the fact that

the majority of the head teachers within the Swedish educational system are women, it was described that the head teacher is still expected to be a man. This shows that the gendering of certain professions as feminine and others as masculine, which Connell's [38] *production dimension* covers, is not mainly about division of labour within the profession, but to a large degree about historical ideas and notions which tend to be recreated even when they are not particularly logical. This may be interpreted as an example of *culture lag*, as old notions of femininity and masculinity persist even though society has changed [36]. The strong hesitation regarding whether gender plays any role which initially characterised the discussions can be understood based on the connection between school leadership and masculinity. Women's opposition to the idea that gender plays a role can be interpreted as a way of trying to ignore expectations that the head teacher should be a man. They also describe negative experiences where they are not taken seriously as women, are treated in a condescending manner or encounter special expectations. At the same time it becomes clear that the gender aspect, *i.e.* the fact that they are women, is associated with negative notions. Despite the fact that these women do not agree at all with the idea that women are worse leaders than men, they have to deal with this attitude. In addition, female school leadership has been associated with several negative aspects since the proportion of women within the head teacher profession started to increase [26]. Women are associated with deterioration when it comes to the status of head teachers and of the educational development of schools. Further, there is a long history in Swedish schools of connecting gender issues with shortcomings in women [23]. The clear unwillingness to be associated with gender and gender issues expressed by several women in this study can be understood against this backdrop. One interpretation is that the head teachers in this study simply do not want to be linked to negative associations which their gender may arouse.

The notion that women are not as good as men, can be understood based on Connell's [38] *power dimension*. Men and aspects associated with masculinity are ascribed a higher status than women and aspects associated with femininity. Denial of the fact that gender plays any role should also be seen in the light of the fact that Sweden is often described as a gender equal country. In many situations, the widespread notion that Sweden is already a gender equal country may stand in the way of discussing gender issues for those who want to challenge the gender order [49]. In addition, the standing of the head teachers can be understood based on the dilemma which occurs when the vision of gender equality, and thereby gender neutral treatment, clashes with the gendered everyday reality [50].

The hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity may also be linked to other hierarchical dimensions. One of the head teachers experienced that she was treated in a better manner when she moved from being a head at a preschool to a compulsory school. Within the education system, working with young children is associated with women, while working with older students is associated with men to a larger extent [51] [38]. The connections of school leadership to masculinity also include associations with authority [8] [45]. Further,

this authority is covered within Connell's [38] *power dimension*. According to Reskin and Padavic [52], the notion that women should not have such authority that they become superior to men is fundamental within many cultures around the world. The women in this study discuss parents who do not respect their decisions, which results in fathers calling and expecting head teachers to change the decision which has been communicated to the mothers. In these cases the parents seem to expect that the female head teacher should subordinate herself to the male parent.

Some head teachers are comfortable talking about "female leadership", while for others this entails unwelcome expectations and requirements. Talking about female and male leadership also means that the *symbolic gender dimension* which Connell [38] talks about is recreated. Connell points out that femininity and masculinity are often understood in terms of opposites, something which becomes clear when discussing female and male leadership, where female leadership is understood as care-centric and relationship-focused in contrast to male rational and assignment-focused leadership. The notion that "female leadership" focuses particularly on care and relationships further illustrates the *emotional dimension of gender* which Connell [38] addresses.

In Sweden, the role of schools in terms of changing society in a more gender equal direction has been emphasised for several decades. In this context the role of head teachers is often emphasised, and in the compulsory school curriculum head teachers are also assigned a special responsibility. Despite this, gender issues often have a weak position within schools [2]. There was concern among the female head teachers in this study that a focus on gender may have negative consequences. There was apprehension that discussions on gender and gender equality would weaken them in their professional role.

To sum up, female head teachers in Swedish schools have, unlike their male counterparts, both been considered to be too few, and in this context portrayed as having low self-esteem, and said to be too many, which has been supposed to be bad for both the school leadership and for schools. Against this backdrop, the ambivalence towards gender issues which head teachers in this study expressed seems understandable and may be a contributory factor behind the issues not being assigned a stronger position within schools.

One conclusion is that head teachers must be more aware of how notions concerning femininities and masculinities affect head teachers' work as well as everyday situations for students in schools.

The findings have implications for future research. In the present study, the ambivalence was never directly addressed. However, by interviewing female head teachers explicitly about their ambivalence and resistance toward gender issues, more light would be shed on the complexity of the matter, as well as on the situations faced by women in educational leadership.

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