

Gender equality in Swedish academia: unpacking the toolbox

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Abstract

Gender inequalities persist among Swedish academic staff, and gender balance is especially skewed toward men in the most prestigious academic career positions, such as professorships. In this article, the measures used in Swedish universities to promote gender equality among academic staff are investigated and related to theories of gender. The study is based on interview survey data on gender and diversity policies from 14 Swedish universities with an actor–structure categorization of gender equality (GE) measures used in Sweden universities since 1990. This first comprehensive study of GE policy among Swedish universities provides unique data on what policies universities have in place and rejects the notion that individual measures are predominantly used to fight gender inequality. Universities mostly use structural measures to ‘fix’ the organization, but from this approach follows that those measures are often gender neutral and soft, indicating a strong belief in gender-neutral principles, and they might limit the effect of action.

Keywords: academia; gender equality measures; higher education; higher education policy; Sweden

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Gender equality (GE) is a central target in Swedish policy on higher education. Universities have recurrently been charged to do more to guarantee equal opportunities and to increase the number of women professors (Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2014; Swedish Government Bill, 2009). As a result, a number of GE initiatives have been introduced in universities. However, in spite of a long tradition of GE work, most projects and interventions have not led to fundamental change. In Sweden, as in other European countries, academic career opportunities are still gendered, vertically and horizontally. Women are underrepresented in higher academic positions but overrepresented in the lower ranks (European Commission, 2019). From 1995 to 2020, the share of women among professors rose from 8% to 31% (Statistics Sweden, 2020) but remained well below the threshold

for gender balance. The share of women among senior lecturers (49%), career positions (49%), and PhD graduates (47%) was almost in balance in 2020.

The Swedish higher education system is unitary, and the institutions are primarily publicly funded. Therefore, the state exercises substantial authority over universities' recruitment and promotion procedures. Sweden has over the past 30 years applied a variety of measures to address the underrepresentation of women in top academic positions (Bergman & Rustad, 2013), and many important measures are regulated at the national level (Silander et al., 2022). Comprehensive laws that require employers to take proactive measures and regulations contributing to work–family reconciliation have placed Sweden among the leaders in gender policy implementation in higher education (Lipinsky, 2013). This makes Sweden a particularly apt case for the study of national-level policies for advancing GE in academic careers, especially as the slow pace of change stands in contrast to a history of progressive national-level legislation to promote GE.

Since Max Weber, organizational researchers have argued for the potential of personal systems in workplaces to prevent discrimination and inequality (Dobbin et al., 2015). Research has shown several important activities for reaching GE, such as transparency in hiring and promotion, organizational responsibility structures, and affirmative action plans (Dobbin et al., 2015; Holzer & Neumark, 2006; Kalev et al., 2006; Naff & Kellough, 2003; Timmers et al., 2010). However, only a few studies have investigated the types of GE measures used in Nordic higher-education institutions. These studies have indicated the importance of revising existing organizational cultures (Nielsen, 2017) and using affirmative action activities (Moratti, 2020).

Measures to increase GE in universities have been criticized for not being based on gender theories (Heikkilä & Häyrén Weinestål, 2009) or for being based on liberal feminist approaches focused on individual women and ignoring gendered academic structures (Fältholm et al., 2010). Researchers have conducted a number of international studies and reports to investigate policy measures that universities apply to remedy women's underrepresentation (Caprile et al., 2011; Husu, 2015; Nielsen, 2017; Timmers et al., 2010). However, despite a few reports on GE activities at Swedish universities (Ministry of Education, 1994; Heikkilä & Häyrén-Weinestål, 2009; Swedish Agency of Higher Education, 2000, 2003), there is still a lack of comprehensive studies designed to draw general conclusions regarding the type of activities performed at the university level.

Therefore, this is a study on how universities seek to remedy workplace inequality by investigating national and institutional measures used to support GE. Bacchi (2009) argued that a policy holds assumptions about the problem it is meant to solve and that actions to promote GE are typically based on implicit or explicit assumptions about gender and behavioral change. GE measures used at 14 universities were investigated based on data-supported survey interviews with HR

personnel and equality coordinators. By investigating such measures' composition and frequency over time, we can learn more about how universities perceive gender inequalities at universities and how this has changed in relation to national policy and underlying assumptions about gender differences (Rees, 2005; Squires, 2008).

Gender equality policy in Sweden

The current Swedish national GE policy stands on two legs. One is a firm, comprehensive base of legislation and regulation to guarantee equal treatment and prohibit discrimination. The second has consisted of a combination of monitoring and supporting activities, which since 2010 have formally taken place under the umbrella of mainstreaming.

Early initiatives for gender equality in higher education: state intervention and preferential treatment

Sweden has a relatively long tradition of GE work targeting academic careers. National legislation stipulates prohibition against discrimination, and GE legislation was enacted in the late 1970s. The Gender Equality Act of 1979 set terms for universities (and all other employers) to participate actively in activities to reach equality and combat discrimination (SFS, 1979). In 1983, the Delegation for Gender Equality was commissioned to initiate, monitor, and coordinate research on GE in Sweden (Swedish Government, 1983). In 1992, the Gender Equality Group was initiated as an advisor to the Minister of Education (Swedish Government, 1995). In 1995, the Swedish government launched the Gender Equality in Education Bill (Swedish Government Bill, 1994/95, 164), which introduced a number of measures to improve the gender balance in schools and higher education, including gender balance among university teachers. At the same time, a public report called for less focus on measures focusing on STEM and more focus on the lack of women in higher positions in academia (Swedish Government, 1995). The report resulted in two important initiatives. The first was the so-called Tham reform, named after the Minister of Education at the time, launched in 1995 and designated for the underrepresented sex. The second one was the 1997 introduction of quantitative recruitment targets for female professors. The Tham reform (Swedish Government Bill 1994/95, 164) proposed a number of measures to improve gender balance among university teachers, including special funding allocated to hiring 30 female professors and doctoral students and 50 postdoctoral fellows. The positions were designated particularly in areas where women's representation was low and called for the use of preferential treatment (Jordansson, 1999). However, a question to the European Court of Justice on the regulation's compliance with the EU legislation clarified that a female and male applicant must have equal or almost

equal merits for a female applicant to be recruited over a man, and in 2000, the court struck down the way preferential treatment was suggested in the bill (Lerwall, 2001).

Besides the Tham reform, a number of other activities to promote GE were reported to take place at the universities. Many of the early initiatives (1985–1992) consisted of describing or analyzing gender distribution at local institutions or launching projects to raise awareness of GE (Ministry of Education, 1994; Swedish Agency of Higher Education, 2000, 2003). A majority of the projects were reported to be directed toward individuals rather than aiming at changing existing structures (Ministry of Education 1994, p. 22) and were given limited time frames.

Gender equality policy since 2000: strengthening legislation and capacity-building efforts

A law against discrimination (Discrimination Act, 2003) was introduced in 2003, and all earlier legislation regulating GE and discrimination was merged into the Discrimination Act in 2009 (Discrimination Act, 2008). This state regulation of GE in Sweden has persisted. Government pressure for universities to implement GE has strengthened over time through the demand for equality plans, active measures to attract applicants of the underrepresented sex when recruiting, and enabling female and male employees to combine employment and parenthood. However, evaluations have pointed out limitations in universities' equality plans (National Agency of Higher Education 2000, p. 11), stating that universities continually lack full-scale equality plans with a general scope and clear distribution of responsibilities at all levels (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2021). As a result of the merger of all grounds of discrimination into one act in 2009, the language of policy changed and gender became a part of a larger umbrella of diversity policy.

In 2009, the government commissioned the Delegation for Gender Equality to propose measures to promote GE in higher education and distribute support for local initiatives. Between 2009 and 2011, the delegation distributed 4.3 million euros in support of 37 projects in the universities. However, in their final report, the delegation noted major shortcomings in GE work regarding planning, long-term cooperation, and theoretical and practical spreading of gender knowledge to various parts of university organizations (Swedish Government, 2011).

Gender equality policy since 2010: increased institutional autonomy and mainstreaming

In 2010, an overall reconstruction of the system of governmental control over higher education took place through the autonomy reform, which was aimed at increasing institutional independency in the sector (Swedish Government Bill, 2009/19, 149). Next came a move toward increased institutional independency in the issue of GE; the general requirements to report gender composition among staff

to the government were all removed whereas the requirement to report on fulfillment of targets set to recruit female professors remained. The focus of actions at the national level was transferred to auditing activities and evaluations (Swedish Government, 2011, 158).

The autonomy reform was closely intertwined with the emphasis on gender mainstreaming (GM), which has been the official governmental strategy for realizing GE objectives since 2010. The strategy of GM has been applied in the public sector contemporaneously with new public management (Wittbom & Häyrén, 2021), which was a strong feature of the autonomy reform. In a subsequent reform in 2016, Swedish universities were commissioned to produce a plan for GM work for 2016–2019. Considerable leeway was left to the universities, for they were required to analyze the need for development goals and take action to reach those goals (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2019).

EU policy and gender mainstreaming

GM rests on the idea that GE should not be a separate area of specialization but part of decision making at all institutional levels (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2019). Mainstreaming is based on a principle of systematic interventions for change defined as a '(re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a GE perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making' (The Council of Europe's Group, 1998). Mainstreaming, a policy the European Commission originally adopted in 1996 (Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2010, typically involves soft tools because it is a nonbinding and flexible instrument, in clear contrast with the traditional regulatory and economic instruments that have historically been central to EU GE policy (Hantrais, 2008) and where constraints are cognitive rather than formal through voluntary procedures. Membership in the EU has also affected Swedish policy on GE with the impact of the Directive of Equal Rights (Council Directive 76/207/EEC), which limits universities' ability to use preferential treatment (Husu, 2015; Lerwall, 2001). Rees (2006) described EU work on GE policy as a 'step-by-step' development. It starts with the strategy of equal treatment, with a strong focus on equal rights for workers resulting in a number of directives and legislation influencing the member states, followed by the use of positive action and the current situation with a focus on mainstreaming. The first two phases are intimately connected to women's participation in the workforce, where the legal basis for action in the area of GE is anchored. The third phase, mainstreaming, is argued to widen the scope by also addressing representation, decision making, and deeply rooted organizational cultures and practices in which inequalities are embedded.

Swedish policy resembles the steps Rees (2006) described. In many ways, national GE policy has, similar to other areas in the sector, moved from relatively

strong state intervention to increased institutional autonomy. Today, GM is the overall policy although it is still somewhat unclear how it should be defined or what it ought to include (Jordansson & Peterson, 2019). Critics have highlighted a lack of transformative results, stressing the difficulties of implementation (Mazey, 2001) and reduced political steering (Alnebratt & Rönnblom, 2016). It has been described as a policy of ‘ticking off’ dominated by checklists and quantitative targets (Carbin & Rönnblom, 2012) and as an abstract policy difficult to put into practice (Callerstig, 2014). Ahmed (2007) warned about the risk of diversity and equality becoming measures of institutional performance, to do the documents instead of ‘doing the doing’ (p. 590), risking limiting actual work. In the Swedish higher-education context, GM has been criticized for leading to a slower pace of reforms compared to previous decades and an increase of ‘projectification’ of gender equality activities, potentially impeding more long-term structural changes (Swedish Government, 2011, 158). Additionally, the Delegation of Gender Equality in higher Education acknowledged the difficulties in establishing a standard for how work on promoting GE in higher education should be conducted (Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2014, p. 26).

Current national gender equality policy

Sweden has comprehensive antidiscrimination and transparency regulations targeting academia. General equality and antidiscrimination legislation regulate higher education institutions through the Discrimination Act (2008, p. 567). Transparency in recruitment is regulated nationally through qualifications and assessment criteria for professors and senior lecturers (Higher Law of Employment, 1994, p. 373; Higher Education Act, 1992; Higher Education Ordinance, 1993, p. 100). Equality legislation has developed to ban discrimination, including requirements for employers, and then promote equality (Borchorst et al., 2012). In accordance with the Discrimination Act (Chapter 3), higher-education institutions must plan and document equal-treatment actions. In addition, requirements exist for active measures, including those to investigate the risks of discrimination, analyze its causes, and take action to prevent it and to evaluate the measures taken (Swedish Government, 2014). The universities are required to report on their systematic work on GM (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2019; Swedish Government, 2014) or their fulfillment of targets set for recruiting female professors (Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2020).

Categorization of gender equality measures

Policymakers use various kinds of policy measures to achieve their intended goals (Schneider & Ingram, 1990), defined as actions intended to change people’s

behavior in some way. GE measures can be analyzed based on what they are intended to achieve. In line with this, Timmers et al. (2010) distinguished measures that target the individual, culture, or structure. Another approach, which Kalev et al. (2006) took in their study on diversity measures' efficacy, was to single out initiatives to establish organizational responsibility for diversity and initiatives to change bias through training or through reducing women's and minority workers' social isolation. In their large study on diversity measures, Dobbin et al. (2015) focused on how managers were motivated to influence change by alternating among activities that influence managerial motivation for promoting diversity, activities that constrain managers' discretion to discriminate, measures to increase transparency, and monitoring processes.

In this study, an analytical categorization scheme based on research conducted as part of the Nordic Centre of Excellence (NORDICORE) research project on GE in the Nordic countries is used. In this project, a categorization was developed based on research on GE and diversity policy in organizations. A distinction is made between policies that target individuals and those that target structures. An actor-oriented policy includes measures that target members of the underrepresented gender as well as measures aimed at changing staff and manager behavior through training. Structure-oriented policy includes measures establishing organizational responsibility and those establishing preferential treatment. In addition, gender assumptions in terms of sameness or differences are addressed. In this paper, the focus is on the institutional level, specifically universities' use of GE measures. Therefore, only the measures that universities chose to use to promote equality are considered and not activities regulated at the national level, such as transparency or requirements for GE plans.

1. Targeted measures

Targeted measures focus on members of the underrepresented sex and are intended to change their behavior. These measures are based on the assumption that men and women differ and that underrepresentation is a consequence of female traits, cognition, attitudes, and behaviors (Fagenson, 1990). This type of measure falls under the category of ‘positive action’ because they address disadvantages women experience as a consequence of differences (Rees, 2006; Squires, 2008). These measures are aimed at changing the individuals’ behavior (at “fixing” the women) through supportive intervention strategies (Kalev et al., 2006), often based on an analysis of deficits that position women either as lacking knowledge or networks or behaving in a less competitive way (not taking risks, not applying for funding, not applying for promotion, not publishing enough, etc.). Such measures can include training, coaching, networking, or mentoring programs specifically for women faculty; promotion or tenure workshops for female faculty; and leadership-development programs.

In the Swedish case, examples found in the survey of targeted measures include special funding for women academic staff to qualify for promotion, mentoring programs for women, career-development workshops for women, networking gatherings for women academic leaders, and leadership-development programs for women.

2. Training measures

Instead of targeting women, training measures are intended to prevent managers and gatekeepers holding implicit biases that may reproduce existing patterns of inequality (Kalev et al., 2006). The assumption is that management in organizations is not gender neutral but involves practices that traditionally value men more than women (Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008). Managers and gatekeepers who hold stereotypes of men and women may perform assessment, selection, and evaluation processes (Fagenson, 1990; Timmers et al., 2010). Training measures target the norms and values of strategic staff in an organization (such as department heads, deans, members of recruitment and promotion committees, and funders). Such measures can take the form of gender and diversity training, intended to change the behavior of managers and gatekeepers responsible for hiring and selecting processes or for promotions. Other measures might include instructions to require female representation in committees and/or clear communication of gender policies to applicants (Timmers et al., 2010). Note that training measures have shown no or even a negative effect on gender composition (Dobbin et al., 2015; Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Kalev et al., 2006; Kellough & Naff, 2004; Timmers et al., 2010).

The training measures used in Swedish higher education include diversity training for academic staff, department heads, and hiring or promotion committees as well as training for academic staff regarding sexual harassment. Furthermore,

these include written instructions for hiring or promotion committees regarding gender and diversity bias as well as promotion of equality being included as part of the qualifications for department heads.

3. Organizational responsibility measures

If organizations fail to assign responsibility for diversity goals to a specific office or person, then these goals risk being lost when managers meet competing demands from scholars. The solution is to assign responsibility for setting goals, allocating means, and evaluating progress, including through action plans, internal monitoring, and the introduction of diversity committees (Kalev et al., 2006). Policies seeking structural changes are aimed at changing how rules, structures, decisions, or processes are organized, such as by increasing representation or transparency. The strategy also includes measures to strengthen the organization's responsibility through diversity offices or officers, transparent procedures for workload allocation and promotion (Probert, 2005), and transparent job postings (van den Brink, 2010).

The organizational responsibility measures found include forming an office and appointing a person devoted to equality/diversity, a standing committee, or an equivalent as well as written procedures for discrimination or addressing sexual harassment grievances for academics.

4. Preferential treatment measures

Structure-oriented policy is also focused on the nature of organizational structures, which can influence employees' entry and promotion as well as their ability to conduct research in academia. Preferential treatment measures address deeply rooted organizational cultures and practices in which inequalities are embedded (Rees, 2006), including specific actions to overcome unequal starting positions in society (Hafner-Burton & Pollack, 2009). The assumption is that existing structures are not gender neutral but rather favor one gender (usually men) in a variety of subtle and often invisible ways. Here, organizational hierarchies and rules are perceived as obstacles to women's advancement. Measures can target, for example, recruitment and promotion procedures to favor women, such as new types of appointments, earmarking funding for the underrepresented sex, or offering female academics incentives.

In the Swedish higher education context, preferential treatment measures include promoting proactive measures to increase the proportion of the underrepresented sex among academic staff, invitation procedures for professorships to increase the proportion of the underrepresented sex, and earmarking to support hiring members of the underrepresented sex.

Data and method

The study is based on organizational survey data on GE and diversity policies at 14 Swedish universities. Data was collected between 2018 and 2020 as part of the Nordicore project in a data-supported survey of universities in Sweden, Norway, and Finland. All 17 full-scale Swedish universities the Swedish Higher Education Authority listed received an invitation to participate, of which three declined (excluded university colleges and universities of fine arts were excluded). Due to increased institutional autonomy and the strengthening of universities' central governance (Enders et al., 2013; Hansen et al., 2019), policies and guidelines at the central institutional level were considered important and were in focus for the investigation. The survey, administered individually either face to face or via Skype/Zoom interviews, included questions on universities' formal central-level policies, their measures to promote GE and diversity, and the timing of policies (the start and end year of each policy), based on a design by Professor Alexandra Kaley and Professor Frank Dobbin's work on diversity management in the United States. Data collection followed a similar process as that Dobbin et al. (2015) and Timmers et al. (2010) followed. Most of the respondents were HR personnel (HR directors or administrators) or equality coordinators. In many cases, especially in large institutions, several people were interviewed about the measures taken at the central university level. In Sweden 26 people were interviewed.

The respondents were presented with a battery of questions regarding different forms of GE measures, based on previous research and on three pilot interviews. During the first round of interviews, new examples of GE measures came up and were added to the questionnaire. The individual survey questions represented binary variables, where the main response choices were 'yes' and 'no' (with the option to respond 'I don't know' or 'I don't want to answer'); if respondents answered 'yes,' they were also asked the period during which the policy had been in place. Data were collected from the 1990s, when policies' formulation began in the Nordic countries (Husu, 2001; Swedish Government, 2011).

The reliability of the data is strengthened by the fact that Swedish universities are transparent organizations and information on gender equality activities can, in many cases, be found in public records. Answers were supported with references to websites, institutional documents, or annual reports, and to minimize the risk of bias, HR officers and equality officers were often interviewed together. One challenge to the data collection was the short institutional memory caused by frequent turnover of gender equality officers, resulting in difficulties going back in history. If the respondent did not know whether a certain policy had been used at the institution, when it started, or when it had been stopped, they were asked to consult colleagues or institutional records. If the respondent still could not

give an exact timing of the policies, we accepted answers that gave an approximate date range (e.g., ‘at least 10 years ago’ or ‘the beginning of the 2000s’). If no time period information was available, the response was treated as missing data. For the analysis, the measures used (17 in total for Sweden) were sorted into the analytical categories presented above (see Appendix 1; measures derived directly from national legislation were excluded from the analysis).

Use of gender equality measures by Swedish universities

The results show that Swedish universities use a range of measures to support gender equality. Table 1 shows basic information for the 17 measures used at the 14 investigated universities beginning in 2010, when, according to the review above, is when GE measures started to become widespread.

Table 1. Accumulated frequencies, means, and standard deviations of measures used, 2010–2020.

University	Targeted measures	Training measure	Organizational measures	Preferential Measures	Total
Karlstad University	8	54	62	15	139
Uppsala University	13	46	46	33	138
Luleå Technical University	38	15	16	15	84
University of Lund	11	8	33	24	76
Malmö University	1	37	20	12	70
Chalmers Technical University	11	19	17	11	58
Linnaeus University	0	1	41	16	58
Stockholm Business School	14	15	18	4	51
Linköping University	0	1	46	2	49
Örebro University	0	2	36	0	38
Karolinska Institute	5	1	21	7	34
Mid Sweden University	0	9	24	0	33
Gothenburg University	3	5	20	2	30
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences	0	4	13	3	20
Total	104	217	413	144	
Mean	7.4	15.5	29.5	10.3	
Standard Dev.	10.3	17.6	14.7	9.7	
Max.	38	54	62	33	
Min.	0	1	13	0	

Table 1 shows that the universities most frequently used organizational measures, followed by training measures. Preferential treatment measures and targeted measures were used less frequently. The standard deviations reveal high variation among the universities in their use of measures; some used many measures, whereas others used few. This is especially the case for training measures (used about half as often as organizational measures were), which had the highest standard deviation (17.6), indicating that some universities use training measures frequently but other almost never use them. The table also shows that many universities have a substantial number of organizational measures in place but have used very few of the other measures.¹ No correlations were found with the size, 'seniority,' or degree of specialization of the university.

Three distinct user groups emerge from a summary of the number of measures used per university over the 10-year period investigated: one group of low users (five universities) in which 20 to 39 measures were in place; one larger group of moderate users (seven universities) in which 49 to 84 measures were in place; and two universities that stood out with 138 to 139 measures.

Types of measures used

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of measures reported to be in place at the universities between 2010 and 2020 (14 universities, 17 measures), sorted according to the categories presented in the previous section.

¹ The interviews indicated that at the University of Gothenburg, gender equality work often takes place at the faculty level, which is not investigated here.

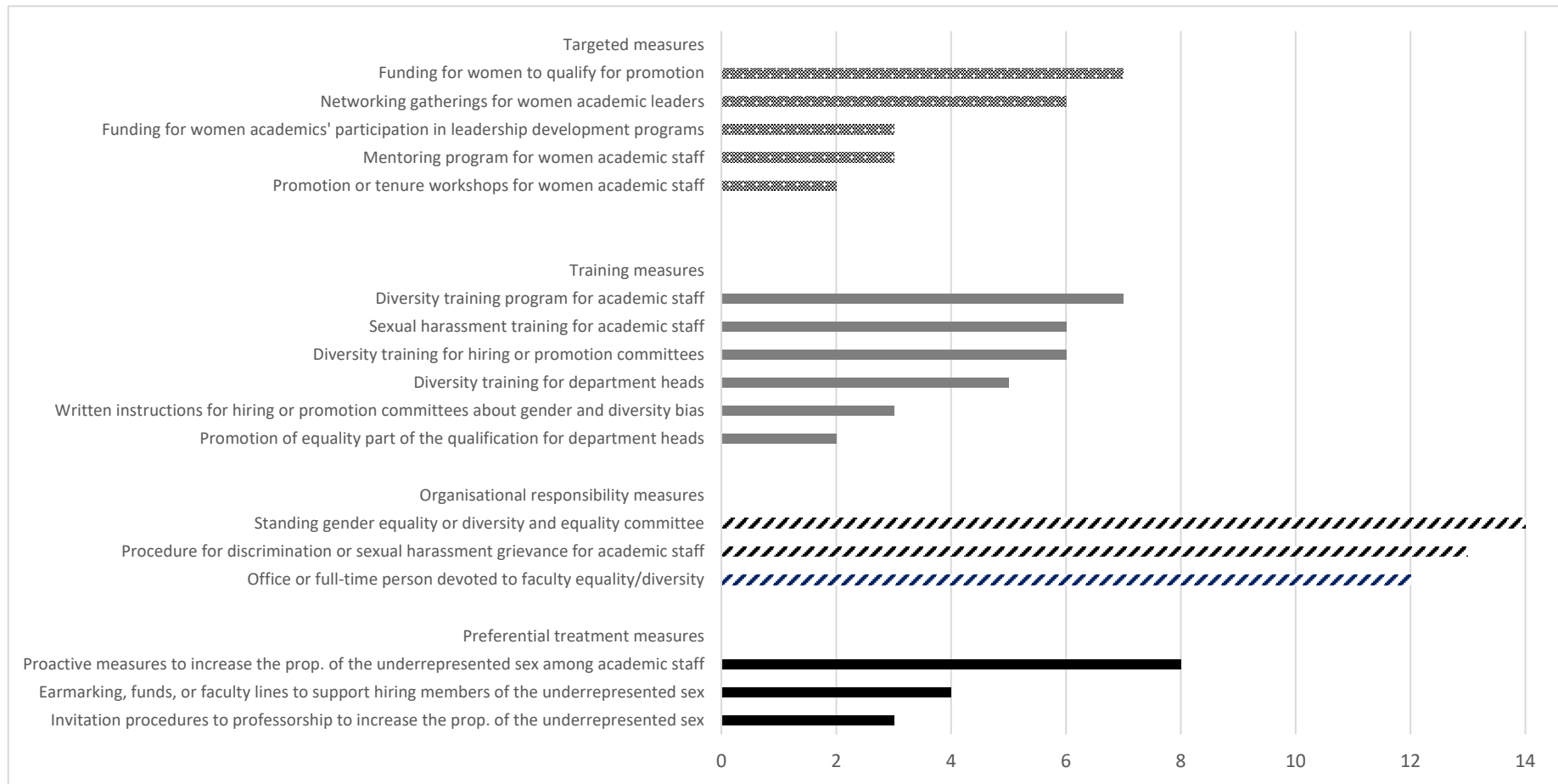


Figure 1. Measures used, 2010–2020; frequencies over categories of measures

Figure 1 shows that the three most-used measures were all organizational ones. For example, all 14 universities had standing committees on gender and/or diversity, and 13 universities had written grievance procedures for discrimination and/or sexual harassment. Among the training measures, about half of the universities used different forms of diversity training for staff, while only two universities required experience of equality work as a promotion criterion.

Clear differences among the groups also existed in the frequency of the measures used. A number of universities used targeted measures such as funding to support women’s qualification for promotions and networking for women, while only two universities had run promotion workshops targeting women. Although all of the organizational measures were used frequently, the use of preferential measures was less common. In addition, when used, preferential treatment came in a subtler form (such as stating in documents that proactive measures should be used) rather than more radical forms of measures such as using invitation procedures or earmarking funds.

Changes to the use of gender equality measures over time

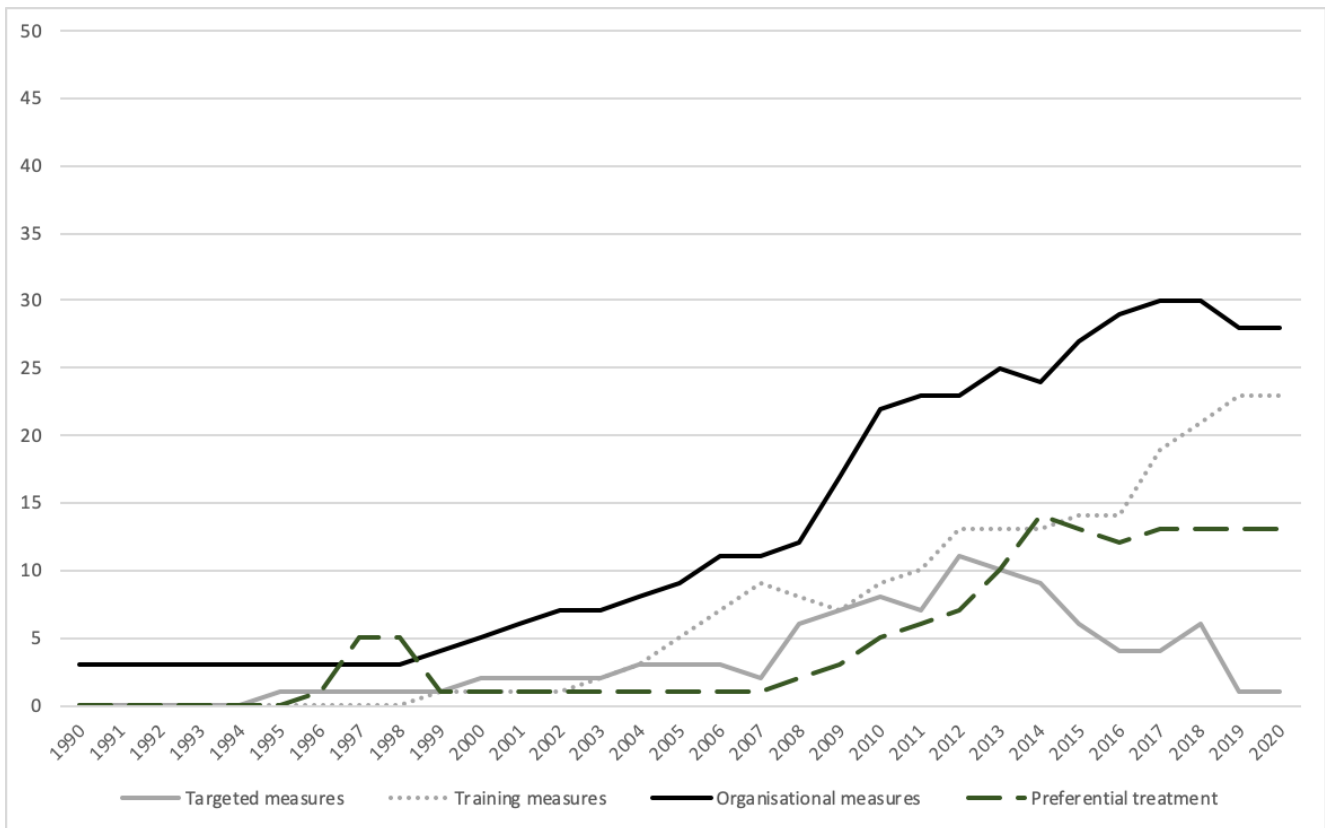


Figure 2. Number of gender equality measures in place in Swedish universities, 1990–2020

Figure 2 shows how the use of measures has changed over time. Swedish universities have become increasingly active in gender equality work, which is likely to reflect a growing focus on diversity and equality issues in the sector. Very few measures were in place in the early 1990s, and the rise of the dashed line shows the introduction of the professorships associated with the Tham reform around 1996 to 1998, representing an almost isolated GE measure within higher education at the time.

Few measures were in place before 2000, which is corroborated by official reports and evaluations for this period. Implementation of organizational measures began around 1998, and different kinds of training measures began to appear around 2003. Preferential treatment returned around 2008, but in a much subtler form, mostly consisting of university policies declaring the intention to use proactive measures, rather than the quite radical measures of earmarking or hiring procedures that represented the bump at the end of the 1990s. All preferential treatment measures have declined since 2014. Figure 2 also shows that, despite an increase between 2008 and 2014 (probably due to the initiatives funded by the Delegation of Gender Equality during these years), targeted measures (represented by the gray line) have not been frequently used by Swedish universities, and during the whole period they have been used less than organizational measures and training measures have been. Both organizational measures (the black line) and training measures (the dotted line) showed steady increases throughout the period examined.

Discussion

Since 1990, a number of projects have been initiated to push universities to work toward gender equality, from state interventions and preferential treatment initiatives to capacity-building initiatives for funding projects. Over the course of the period studied, this latter category of state-initiated activities has changed from different forms of activities intended to strengthen gender equality to those requiring mainstreaming. Today, support comes in forms that are more deregulated and decentralized, including assessments and monitoring. National policy directed toward universities is reflected in the measures used at the local level, including the Tham professorships in the late 1990s and the Delegation of Gender Equality initiatives. Mainstreaming has been the official strategy since 2010, as reflected by the domination of organizational measures, the increased use of training measures, and the declining use of stronger preferential treatment measures.

Although comparative reports have placed Sweden in the leading group for implementing gender policy in higher education (Lipinsky, 2013), this study indicates a scattered picture. Only about one-third of the universities had more than half of the measures in place, whereas the rest of the institutions used considerably

fewer measures. The use of measures is not related to the type of university. Larger universities and STEM-dominated universities could be expected to have more measures in place, but no such difference emerged. Instead, the data show that universities used several different measures, which reveals that mainstreaming is an abstract policy that is easy to agree on but difficult to put into practice and to establish standards for (Callerstig, 2014; Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2014) when left entirely to universities to implement (Jordansson & Peterson, 2019).

Policies are based on assumptions about the problem they are meant to solve (Bacchi, 2009). Primarily, universities seek structural change through the organization of committees, formal grievance procedures, and diversity sections or officers, and thereafter by training. If the active use of measures is interpreted as recognition of an existing problem, it is evident that this awareness has increased over the years, and the use of organizational measures indicates that gender inequality is viewed as a structural problem but also as caused by implicit bias and stereotyping. The declining use of targeted and preferential treatment measures implies that these approaches are either considered less relevant or more controversial to implement in the academic context.

The results of this study stand in contrast to the critique that gender equality initiatives have consisted mainly of individual measures seeking to change women themselves (Fältholm et al., 2010). Instead, targeted measures have been less used than other measures have been, and policy has shifted its focus from ‘fixing the women’ to ‘fixing the organization’ (Timmers et al., 2010). The increased use of organizational measures is in line with what scholars have argued is needed to change deeply rooted organizational cultures and practices (Rees, 2006; Squires, 2008) and what previous research has shown is beneficial for diversity (Dobbin et al., 2015; Kalev et al., 2006).

This change in the mix of measures used, with a trend towards less direct and more gender-neutral measures and where controversial measures (such as preferential treatment policies) are declining, is in line with what previous research has discerned (Stratigaki, 2005; Hafner-Burton & Pollack, 2009) and is likely to be a consequence of the stronger European influence in the area. Both organizational and training measures are based on the assumption that women and men are similar, rather than different. Instead of focusing on women and treating them differently, universities are using measures that are more gender-neutral and apply to the whole organization, indicating that belief in gender-neutral principles is strong in academia (Dahlerup, 2010). The decline of targeted measures and the lack of stronger preferential treatment measures suggest that the idea of positive action has diminished in importance and that more controversial proactive measures, such as affirmative action policies, are perceived as less feasible due to stricter European legislation (Moratti, 2020). These results support the claims that mainstreaming

risks depoliticizing gender equality work (Carbin & Rönnblom, 2012) and that gender-specific equality policies are being replaced rather than used as complements (Mazey, 2001; Stratigaki, 2005).

Several of the measures used by the universities are ‘rhetorical,’ stipulating or recommending a means of action such as *advising* a committee to select a woman before a man when their merits are almost equal (preferential treatment) or using a certain protocol in a harassment situation (organizational). As EU legislation has removed some of the most powerful positive action strategies from the policy toolbox, organizational measures and training measures may not achieve the same effect as did the earlier use of earmarked funding or similar radical preferential treatment measures.

The result has implications for policy and policy-makers. First, although the use of organizational measures indicates an increased focus on organizational transformation, most of them represent “paper products” in the form of check-lists, recommendations or protocols. Ahmed (2007) suggested that to prevent diversity work from becoming only doing the documents instead of doing the doing, we must stop assuming that the documents do what they say and instead follow them around to examine how organizations implement them. This calls for further investigations into how universities can implement gender equality at the department and faculty levels. Second, the increased use of training measures can represent a view that gender inequality is due to bias and stereotyping within management. It can also be a way for a university to signal awareness and action. In both, the efficacy of such measures needs to be evaluated carefully, as previous research has reported no or even a negative effect of training measures on organizations’ gender composition (Dobbin et al., 2015; Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Kalev et al., 2006; Kellough & Naff, 2004; Timmers et al., 2010).

This study provided new insights into the use of national and university-level gender equality policies; nevertheless, it has some limitations. First, the data do not show the faculty- or department-level measures, which can make universities look less active. Perhaps targeted measures take place at the faculty level while organizational measures are more likely to be regulated at the central level, which might make the number of targeted measures and training measures lower than they are in reality. However, we expect central-level activities to signal whether gender equality is important for the organization and that they, therefore, indicate how gender equality is perceived more broadly. Second, it was difficult to collect data on policies that had been in place decades ago and were no longer in place; therefore, in some cases, the start and end years determined for some policies represented estimates rather than exact responses. Third, to analyze policy is not a straightforward task and policy measures should not be interpreted as neutral solutions to existing problems (Bacchi, 2009). Policies may be used to signal activity and commitment, which means that the increased number of policy

measures used does not necessary mean ‘better gender equality policy’ but rather a perceived need for the universities to signal awareness and gender-friendliness (Naff & Kellough, 2003).

Despite these limitations, the frequency, type, and timing of the measures provide important insights into activity in gender equality work, including what type of activities universities perform and how this has changed over time. Finally, this is a study of policy in place, only surveying the policies the universities have on paper and making assumptions about their implementation. Therefore, the study is a conservative measure of potential policy effects, which nonetheless can serve as a point of departure for further investigation of how gender equality measures are implemented in faculties and departments.

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Appendix 1. Survey questions

Targeted measures

- Have you ever had a policy that provides special financing for women to qualify for promotion?
- Have you ever run a formal mentoring program specifically for women faculty
- Have you ever specifically networking gatherings for women faculty?
- Have you ever had promotion or tenure workshops for female faculty?
- Have you ever had special funding for female faculty participation in leadership development programs?

Training measures

- Have you ever had a sexual harassment training program for academic staff?
- Have you ever had a diversity training program for academic staff?
- Have you ever provided department chairs or departments heads with training on handling issues of diversity?
- Have you ever provided hiring and/or promotion committees with training on diversity issues?
- Have you ever had a policy giving written instructions for hiring and/or promotion committees about gender and diversity bias?
- Have you ever included the promotion of equality as part of the qualification for department chairs?

Organizational responsibility

- Have you ever had an office and/or full time person devoted to faculty equality/diversity?
- Have you ever had a standing gender equality and/or diversity committee and/or diversity and equality committee?
- Have you ever had a written procedure for discrimination and/or sexual harassment grievance for faculty?

Preferential treatment:

- Have you ever used the invitation procedure to professorship to increase the proportion of the underrepresented sex?
- Have you ever used earmarking, allocating special funds and/or special faculty lines to support hiring members of the underrepresented sex?
- Have you ever promoted the use of proactive measures to increase the proportion of the underrepresented sex among faculty?