Chapter 15
Gender Equity in Medicine in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is about gender equity in medicine in Sweden. It is a descriptive chapter starting with a historical overview of women’s situation in Sweden, and a short history of Swedish women in medicine and academia. It describes the Swedish system and what enhances the possibilities of gender equality. Although there are structural mechanisms working towards gender equality and equity, there are still a lot of problems. Some are accounted for and described. Among other things browsed are healthcare issues where inequity is occurring, medical students and researchers, sexualised violence, and the #metoo-movement which had a big impact in Sweden.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN IN SWEDEN

In the old days…

During the Viking age, women in Scandinavia held a strong position and were in many ways men’s equal. Free women were allowed to practice any guild, they were independent and active on many levels in society. They had the right to choose their spouse and were sexually liberated. Women who married with a dowry had a right to keep it if they later wanted a divorce (Ingelman-Sundberg, 2009). Economically, women did not inherit if there was a male sibling, but if there was no such - or they were widowed, women could be land-owners and have their own business. The Viking woman was known to be self-sufficient and strong-headed. With the introduction of Christianity (900-1200 A D) and other values, women lost most of their freedom and independence. They became part of a religion where male dominance and male rights took over. Through the supremacy of the church, old ways of conflict resolution on a local (often familiar or clan) level, were abandoned. The new ways meant more control over female sexuality and women were submitted to a secluded life within the family or sometimes the church. This meant that from medieval times towards the end of the industrialization women in Sweden were not entitled to practice a guild or a profession, with few exceptions. If they had children or sexual relations out of wedlock this was regarded

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as shameful and with time also punishable. The practice of birth-control was sinful, and eventually also regarded as witchcraft, for which many women lost their lives in Sweden - the last one in 1704. As from the middle of the 19th century things started changing. Women started to advance in society as it became more apparent that they were needed in the workforce. Even with this, despite women being part of family business and agricultural life, they were not recognized as part of the official workforce until very recently.

Towards a Modern Society

Even through the development of today’s modern society (as from industrialization and onwards) women were not always allowed to access higher education. Women born into upper classes could sometimes gain theoretical knowledge through private tuition. In the 19th century this changed quite remarkably as economic growth and social interactions developed. A lot of patriarchal laws, which earlier had ensured that women were kept out of higher education and (therefore) leading posts in society, were changed. This was not an easy task as society, and even the state, were of the opinion that women’s education was a family matter and not a state matter. Allowing women access to higher education was against nature’s laws as the main opinion was that women were meant to breed and take care of the family. If girls were to be allowed to educate themselves, this ought to be within professions that enhanced their femininity (Kvinnsam – National Library for Gender research, 2019). Women that entered into men’s sphere of occupations were perceived as threats. With the growth of industrialization educated women were needed first in the workplace and eventually took place in society as well.

Unmarried women could apply to court to gain majority from 1858, before that they had to apply to the Majesty. As from 1864 unmarried women attained majority at the age of 25 (men at 21), married women gained majority first in 1921, which was also the first year women could vote in Sweden. Sweden was the last Scandinavian country to give women this right. In 1864, women gained rights to open their own private business (a right women in Scandinavia had had during the Viking age). Women did not inherit on an equal basis as men before 1845. In 1873, women were allowed to study at university, with the first woman gaining access to higher education in 1871 when Betty Pettersson studied philosophy at Uppsala University, gaining permission from the Majesty’s royal court.

Women in Academia and the First Female Doctors

The first female doctor to graduate in Sweden was Karolina Widerström in 1888 (Andreen, 1988, Bjurman & Paul, 1988). She was however not the first female doctor in Scandinavia but had two predecessors. Rosina Heikel from Finland managed to pass the final exam in 1878 after having to make an individual application for every course in the curriculum (Bjurman & Paul, 1988, Gustavson-Kaddaka, 2010). Her graduation was not officially acknowledged - but she was eventually allowed to practice medicine in Helsinki after a special resolution was taken by the Finnish senate regarding her qualifications. In Denmark, Nielsine Nielsen graduated from the University of Copenhagen in 1885. She was not to allowed to continue her specialization in Gynecology and Obstetrics in her hometown and moved to Switzerland and England to fulfil her dreams. There were also other women who attempted to study medicine in Sweden but for various reasons (illness or decisions to complete their studies elsewhere) never graduated from a Swedish higher education institution (Hedvall, 1974). The first woman to do a Ph D in medicine was Anna Stecksén in 1900 (in Pathology), but she died in 1904 at the age of 34 having given up her research 2 years earlier due to illness (Bjurman & Paul, 1988, Gustavson-Kaddaka, 2010, Hultcrantz et al, 1998).
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