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Boys Won't Be Boys

By Lisa Abend / Stockholm

On a sunny afternoon in September, a 5-year-old girl played in a sandbox. The box contained more mud than sand, and as she whacked at it forcefully with a plastic shovel, globs of dirt stained her pink tights and pink dress. But at the Nicolaigarden preschool in Stockholm, no teacher chastised her, and certainly no one told her that girls aren't supposed to play like that. In fact, at Nicolaigarden, they try not to use the word *girls* at all.

Or *boys* either. One of the most popular toys at the school, for both sexes, is a set of dolls designed to teach about emotions. Each wears a different expression — one smiles broadly, another frowns — but that is almost all they wear. Except for the homely knit hats that top their Nordically blond heads, the dolls are completely naked, which makes it easy to see that they have no distinguishable gender.

And that just might be a metaphor for what this school, and perhaps Sweden as a whole, is trying to achieve. This is a country in the midst of a dramatic new experiment in gender equality — call it gender neutrality.

When, in the early 1970s, the Swedish government began actively promoting women's rights, even feminists could hardly have imagined the successes to come: near parity in political representation, a near leveling of the playing field in the workplace and fathers who share, if not equally then at least significantly, in the raising of their children. But if Sweden has gone further than almost any other country in the world to eradicate gender discrimination, it has not been content to rest on its laurels. In education, in the media, in sports and sex and shopping and even in its choice of pronouns, the Scandinavian nation is grappling in new ways with the boundaries that have traditionally defined the genders. Sweden has now reached a critical turning point, moving beyond mainstream feminist goals like equal pay and equal opportunity toward a society where gender doesn't matter.

For supporters, that process is a necessary step toward eroding the lingering vestiges of sexism — and

people around the world who care about equality between the sexes are watching with keen interest to see what lessons Sweden can offer other societies. If, the argument goes, discrimination still exists even in progressive Sweden, then equal standards may not be enough. If it expects to eradicate unfair treatment, the country must actively attempt to change deep-seated attitudes about men and women.

But for critics, who charge that feminism has become something of a state religion in Sweden, the country is on the verge of doing away with the idea of men and women altogether — and in the process, they say, casting aside much of the human joy and complexity that comes with difference. For them, Sweden isn't a model for other Western societies but a dangerous experiment in political correctness that would deny biological realities and impose artificial mandates of sameness. A country that has essentially built its national identity on the pursuit of equality, Sweden now finds itself moving into uncharted territory over primal questions of justice and difference.

For the rest of the West, Sweden is "laying the groundwork," says Christine Ingebritsen, professor of Scandinavian and women's studies at the University of Washington. "They're sort of postgender now and are focusing more on humanism, on what — as humans — is going to bring us all closer to equal rights. Sweden is our future."

The struggle over this future is taking place in a country that is already one of the world's bright spots when it comes to women's rights. The World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index, which measures discrepancies in 135 countries between men and women in pay, access to education and other factors, ranks Sweden fourth highest. In the 2010 national elections, women won 45% of the seats in Parliament (down from 47% in the previous elections), and currently 13 of the country's 24 ministers are women. Among women ages 15 to 64, 71.8% work outside the home, compared with 75.6% of men. On the whole, women earn 14% less than men, and when factors like education and profession are taken into account, make 94¢ for every dollar that men do — which isn't perfect but compares favorably with the 77¢ average for American women. "We've achieved this because, to a high extent, Swedes do a good job of recognizing that gender is an issue that needs to be addressed everywhere," says Maria Arnholm, the Minister for Gender Equality, who notes that the government has required what it calls "gender mainstreaming" — the incorporation of a gender-equality perspective — at all policy levels since 1994. "It's like recycling. People do it without thinking now."

But Arnholm and others argue that there's much yet to be done. Although there are more women than men in managerial positions in Sweden's local and national governments, the same is not true for the business world, where women head the boards of only 4% of publicly listed companies. Domestic violence remains a pressing problem, as does rape, which has actually risen in the past several years (though this may be a result of increased reporting). Many of the women who work only do so part time, a result partially caused, Arnholm says, by a failure to split parental leave 50-50 with fathers. And she is particularly troubled that a far greater proportion of unpaid labor — child care, housework, caring for elder family members — is still

done by women. "We're not going to run out of need for this ministry in my lifetime," she says wryly.

Lina Thomsgard agrees. In 2010 she created Rattvisiformedlingen, or Equalisters, a Facebook page whose 44,000 members crowdsource the names of female experts in everything from terrorism analysis to disc jockeying and make those lists available to media and other institutions. "Seventy percent of people featured in the Swedish media are still men," Thomsgard says. "We're saying that's not good enough."

That sense — that even with all its advances, things in Sweden are still not good enough — helps explain why the country's government and other institutions have expanded their goals to include the erosion of gender itself: that is, the roles and assumptions associated with each sex. "I don't think we'll get to the point where there are no boundaries whatsoever," says journalist P.M. Nilsson, who was commissioned by the government to write a report on men's issues. "But in terms of expanding the options of what it means to be a man or a woman, yes, we're definitely moving toward a more gender-neutral society."

He. She. Hen.

Spend a few days in Sweden, and you'll encounter many efforts to erode gender distinctions. And that includes hearing people referred to by a newly popular, gender-neutral pronoun.

Intended as an alternative to the Swedish words *han* (he) and *hon* (she), *hen* was first proposed in the 1960s but burst into public consciousness in 2012 when children's-book author Jesper Lundqvist used it exclusively in his book, *Kivi and the Monster Dog* (neither Kivi nor the pup is identified by sex). That same year, the Swedish national encyclopedia included the word in its print edition, and the weekly newspaper *Nojesguiden* published an issue in which all pronouns had been replaced by *hen*. The word prompted fevered debate (renowned author Jan Guillou referred to it as an attempt "by feminist activists to destroy our language"), but a little over a year after the controversy first broke, major newspapers like *Aftonbladet* routinely employ the pronoun in place of the phrase *he or she*, and lawmakers regularly use *hen* on the floor of Parliament.

Traditional gender stereotypes are being upended in other ways. Many once male professions like medicine, law and journalism now have either equal numbers of both sexes or a slight female advantage. The careers that remain predominantly male preserves — only 3% of the Swedish firefighting corps is female, for example — offer affirmative-action-type programs to attract more women (much to the dismay of critics, who contend that the government is forcing firefighters to lower important standards of physical fitness to accommodate women). In 2012, Top-Toy, one of the largest toy companies in Sweden, issued a holiday catalog in which boys were depicted feeding baby dolls and girls fired Nerf guns; a child of indeterminate gender, dressed in a Spider-Man costume, pushed a baby carriage. Even pornography is changing: in 2009 the Swedish Film Institute — a state organization — helped finance Mia Engberg's *Dirty Diaries*, a collection of shorts that, by focusing on the female perspective, positions itself as feminist porn.

Many of Sweden's equality measures are enshrined in law. The process began in 1971, when joint taxation for spouses was abolished, making it financially advantageous for women to enter the workplace. Subsequent laws have barred gender discrimination in the workplace and tightened penalties for sexual harassment.

But when it comes to blurring the lines between the genders, it is perhaps the country's approach to education that is most innovative. In 1998, Parliament obliged all schools to work against gender stereotypes and provided for the training of gender pedagogues to help preschool teachers do so. At Stockholm's Nicolaigarden, they still stock dolls and trucks, but "neutral" toys like Legos and dinosaurs predominate in the brightly colored rooms. The cozy library is carefully calibrated to contain the same number of books with female protagonists as male. Boys and girls alike twirl silken scarves during dance class (as do their teachers; 30% of the school's instructors are male — the highest percentage of any preschool in Sweden), and they have equal access to pirate and princess costumes. Asked if boys actually choose to dress up as princesses, principal Lotta Rajalin smiles: "They do. It's the grownups who have the expectations."

Besides Nicolaigarden, Rajalin oversees five other public preschools in Stockholm, all of which are dedicated to promoting gender equality. At all the schools, *hen* is freely employed, though at only one of them, Egalia (where a high percentage of children come from LGBT families), is it required. The effort to instill the schools with a greater degree of gender awareness began soon after the 1998 law was enacted. Teachers who thought they treated boys and girls equally changed their minds after having their classrooms filmed and seeing, for example, that when it came time for recess, they let the boys run out into the yard, while urging the girls to wait patiently for help with their coats.

"Once we made the decision to improve this, it wasn't hard to convince the parents," says Rajalin. "I simply did this." She walks over to a whiteboard and draws a circle, then divides it in half. "On the right side are the things for girls" — she draws several lines inside the semicircle — "and on this are the things for boys. And then I asked, 'Do you want your child's life to be a half-circle or a whole one?'"

Marked Men?

For some parents, it's not always easy to navigate the new norms. Par Zetterberg, a marketing executive whose son is enrolled at Nicolaigarden, speaks easily of the boy's dolls. But he also knows a couple who recently refused to tell anyone the sex of their newborn baby because, he says, "they didn't want anyone to project their gender ideas onto the child." Stuffing a jacket into his son's backpack at the school playground, he shakes his head. "That's just going too far."

Some people say the same about Sweden as a whole. Critics of the country's gender innovations maintain that for all the feminist emphasis on removing limitations, both the state and other institutions are imposing a whole new set of prejudices and barriers. "It's as though the politicians have decided that they

have to transform us," says Elise Claeson, a freelance columnist and author of a book about stay-at-home moms. "That they have to reach inside our minds and change them."

A former equality adviser for the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, Claeson says she felt a kind of social prejudice when she left her job to take care of her children — something that few Swedish women do. But it's not only stay-at-home mothers who feel they are the object of prejudice. So too do some men.

An engineer by training, Par Strom has become something of a spokesperson for men who feel oppressed by Sweden's push toward gender neutrality. Society, he says, has turned against men, actively discriminating against them in things like child-custody laws and permitting inequality when it favors women (two-thirds of Swedish university-degree earners, he notes, are female). "We're considered the bad sex," he says, in a voice barely over a whisper as he looks nervously about the busy café, "so it's O.K. to attack us." And in words like *hen* and efforts to create gender-neutral preschools, he sees not equality but erasure. "Before, both men and women were trapped in their gender roles. But now they're trying to create this gray area that is neither male nor female. Or to turn men into women."

Worse, Strom argues, is that there is no room in public discourse for a discussion of these issues. "There are anonymous antifeminist bloggers, and I get lots of e-mails from men who agree, but they stay quiet because they're terrified of their names being exposed and their careers ruined." Strom stopped participating in interviews about gender with Swedish media after the hostility — including a public-radio website that posted a photo of him with a nail through his head — grew too intense. "The media is almost exclusively feminist, and there's no room for moderate dissent," he says. "We've become a single-opinion country."

He may have a point. While a respected feminist writer like Nina Bjork can publish a column in Sweden's largest morning newspaper comparing the position of women in Sweden today to that of black South Africans under apartheid, there is little room for even mild expressions of antifeminism in all but the most conservative papers. "There is a kind of dogma, yes," says Nilsson, who identifies himself as a feminist. "Female sexism is O.K., but not the other way around."

Tell that to Maria Sveland. The feminist writer has been the target of a tremendous amount of vicious hate mail, including a serious death threat. The sender, after writing, "Remember, Maria, it's not only Breivik [the Norwegian right-wing extremist who massacred 77 people in 2011] who hates feminists," promised that he would not give up until he murdered her. And she's hardly the only one receiving threats. "It's becoming more and more O.K. to hate feminists," she says. The intimidation and attempts to suppress speech may yet prove to be dangerous fault lines opening up in a nation known for its tolerance and peaceableness. Or they may be the passing side effects of massive social change.

The vast majority of Swedes, however, seem to be on board with their nation's experiment in closing the

gender gap, and they want to see it through. If they succeed, the rest of the developed world may one day look at gender-neutral pronouns and gender-neutral dolls as every bit as essential to democracy as equal voting rights.

In the meantime, Sweden feels increasingly full of people like Theo Christenson, who are just getting on with their lives in the midst of this remarkable experiment in equality. One Monday evening, the 13-year-old boarded the Stockholm subway, his gym bag in hand. It was rush hour and the car was full, but he had too much energy left over from his after-school ballet class to stand still. Watching himself in the window, he executed a perfect rond de jambe. Asked if he was hassled by other boys for dancing ballet, Christenson said no. Told that that wouldn't necessarily be the case in other countries, he replied sanguinely, "I know. But this is Sweden."

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