

Employers discriminate against foreign-named job applicants in Sweden – no signs of discrimination based on gender or parenthood in general

Sweden is often considered as exemplary in promoting gender equality. In an international comparison, norms of gender equality are widespread among Swedes (Edlund & Öun, 2016) and the gender gap in unpaid (household) work is rather thin (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017). In addition, female labor market participation is relatively high (OECD, 2017), which is probably partly due to extensive family policies and the availability of state-subsidized day-care at a low cost. The parental leave policies are generous in terms of leave length, benefit level and flexibility, encouraging also fathers to take leave (Duvander & Johansson, 2012). A parent with a permanent employment (contract) generally has the right to keep one's job while on parental leave and to work shorter hours until the child has finished the first grade or turns 8 years.

Yet, mothers still take up the majority of the parental leave days even in Sweden (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2018), the gender difference in wages between men and women is rather large (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017), and the gender gap in authority positions increases after entry into parenthood (Bygren & Gähler, 2012). On the one hand, one may expect mothers or women of fertile age to be discriminated against especially in a society like Sweden with extensive family policies. On the other hand, one may expect the opposite as fathers are also expected to be on parental leave and dual-earner households represent the norm.

Foreign-born make up one fifth of the Swedish population (Statistics Sweden, 2021), and an even higher share of Swedes

- Job applicants with a foreign-sounding name receive far fewer positive responses to their applications than applicants with a typical Swedish-sounding name.
- Men with a foreign-sounding name receive fewer positive responses than foreign-named women.
- The study shows no signs of systematic employer discrimination based on gender or parenthood in the labor market at large.

have at least one foreign-born parent. Gaps in employment between foreign-born and natives in Sweden are among the largest in the OECD (OECD, 2014). For these reasons, it is of particular interest to study labor market discrimination based on ethnicity, gender and parenthood in Sweden.

While one may ask employees about the personal and subjective experiences, observing labor market discrimination at large is problematic using survey or register data. Therefore, a well-established method to study hiring discrimination is a field experiment, i.e., a correspondence audit, in which written job applications are sent to advertised vacancies and employers' responses to these are documented. Certain characteristics, such as gender and ethnicity, of the fictitious job candidates are varied whereas education and work experience are equal within occupations. Thus, distinct

female and male names as well as native and foreign-sounding names are generally used to signal the gender and ethnic background, respectively, of the candidates.

Discrimination of job applicants based on ethnicity

Using this approach, we find no evidence of systematic discrimination of job applicants based on gender or parenthood status in Sweden at large (Bygren et al., 2017). This applies both to jobs requiring higher education and less education. Yet, male recruiters appear to favor male applicants, especially in gender-balanced occupations (Erlandsson, 2019).

The results do show however, that ethnic discrimination takes place. Job applicants with foreign-sounding names receive substantially fewer positive responses to their job applications than applicants with typical Swedish-sounding names (Erlandsson, 2022). This is regardless of recruiter gender. Moreover, men with foreign-sounding names are contacted less often by employers than women with foreign-sounding names. This is notable particularly because the fictitious applicants have identical Swedish educational and occupational backgrounds, within occupations.

These results are largely in line with recent research from Europe. While previous findings on gender discrimination are somewhat diverse (Baert, 2018), e.g., depending on the country and occupational context, many recent European studies do not show discrimination against women in general (Albert et al., 2011; Baert, 2015; Birkelund et al., 2022; Bygren & Gähler, 2021). In fact, there is some evidence of hiring discrimination in favor of women (Birkelund et al., 2022).

Yet, discrimination against job applicants with foreign-sounding names is well documented in research (Baert, 2018; Riach & Rich, 2002; Bursell, 2014; Di Stasio & Larsen, 2020). Several Nordic studies show foreign-named men to encounter more hiring discrimination than foreign-named women (Arai et al., 2016; Dahl & Krog, 2018; Liebkind et al., 2016; Midtbøen, 2016). But there are exceptions to this in Europe (Blommaert et al., 2014), and discrimination patterns

can vary depending on the gender composition of the occupation (Bursell, 2014) and ethnic or racial background (Di Stasio & Larsen, 2020). Recruiter gender and its role for discrimination has been studied much less in field experiments and the research findings are somewhat varying.

Discrimination can occur in other dimensions related to employment

It is important to keep in mind that this method only studies the early stage of the formal hiring process, and not the final hiring decisions. Discrimination can also take place in other phases related to employment, such as promotions, training opportunities, wages, firings and informal recruitment processes. Our findings point to other mechanisms than gender discrimination in the hiring process as more important for gender equalities in the Swedish labor market.

Yet, the results imply that discrimination against job applicants with foreign-sounding names contributes to ethnic inequality in the labor market, and especially so for men with foreign-sounding names. If foreign-named (male) workers, in general, receive fewer responses to their job applications, they can be assumed to be less likely to end up in an interview and to be hired than workers with typical native names.

Data and research method

The study comprises (up to) 5 641 applications that were sent in response to job advertisements in Sweden during 2013-2020. (Some of the studies use a smaller sample of the data.) Applications were sent to 20 occupations. One job application per vacancy was submitted, and employers' responses were documented. The names of the fictitious job applicants were used to indicate gender and ethnicity. Names were randomized in the applications. The applicants had identical merits within occupations, i.e., they had the same occupation-specific education and employment background. They were all aged 31. Information about the gender of the recruiter or the contact person was based on the employers' responses and the job advertisements.

For more information

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