



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG  
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

# What affects female middle managers' career opportunities in the banking sector

A comparative case study of Sweden and Estonia from the view of female  
managers

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## **Abstract**

How far European countries have come in their work with gender equality varies. This paper compares female middle managers' career opportunities in one of the European countries that is in the fore front when speaking of gender equality, Sweden, with another country who has a bit more to work with, Estonia. This thesis is conducted as a case study at Swedbank and therefore focuses on female middle managers' career opportunities in the banking sector in the two selected countries.

During the study, qualitative and open interviews were conducted with eight women working at Swedbank; four Swedish and four Estonian. The results of these interviews were then analyzed and compared with relevant theories related to female management, for example The Glass Ceiling Theory and The Social Role Theory. The essay also contains a comparative analysis of the two countries, where the aim is to find out what the basis for the differences in the observance of gender equality is.

The study found that the countries' different histories have contributed to the current gender equality situation in the two countries. Common to both countries is that parental leave is something that affects women's careers. It appears that in both countries there is a norm that women are the ones who are on parental leave, although this norm is much stronger in Estonia. There are also stereotypes and preconceptions about women's characteristics and toward their leadership style. This as well affects women's career opportunities.

**Key words:** Female management, Career opportunities, Gender roles, Barriers, Sweden, Estonia

## **Definitions**

*Career* - The word career is difficult to define and the opinion about the meaning differs. Poulsen (2006) argues that the concept itself has changed over time. During the industrial economy it was an objective concept where external signs such as titles and salary were important. The knowledge based economy instead include the entire working life; whether you move up, down or sideways (Poulsen 2006).

*Middle managers* - Middle managers have, according to Zhang et al. (2008), a central role in an organization. Further Zhang et al. (2008) argues that their role is to ensure that the organization's strategy is implemented and thereby ensure that the organization's goals are achieved. Eagly and Karau (2002) state that middle managers believe their roles require more relational skills. This is a behavior women are considered more engaged in than men.

*Top managers* - According to Hambrick and Mason (1984) a top manager is a person in the organization who has the responsibility for developing the main policies that govern the activities of the organization. Eagly and Karau (2002) mean that the more senior leadership roles gets, the more masculine are the perceptions toward the leadership and the less women complies with these roles.

## **List of figures**

Figure 1: Trend 2006-2014 Sweden

Figure 2: Score Card - Sweden 2014

Figure 3: Trend 2006 - 2014 Estonia

Figure 4: Score Card - Estonia 2014

## **List of tables**

Table 1: Summary of the theories

Table 2: Development of gender equality in Sweden and Estonia

Table 3: Summary of the interviews

# Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 Background .....	7
1.1.1 Women's underrepresentation in top positions .....	7
1.1.2 Career barriers toward female managers.....	7
1.1.3 Gender equality in Sweden and Estonia.....	8
1.2 Problem discussion .....	9
1.3 The purpose of the study .....	9
1.4 Research question.....	10
1.5 Delimitations of the study .....	10
1.6 Thesis structure .....	11
<b>2. Theory .....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 Structural and social perspective of gender .....	12
2.2 Glass theories .....	13
2.2.1 The Glass Ceiling .....	13
2.2.1.1 Societal Barriers .....	14
2.2.1.2 The Government Barriers .....	14
2.2.1.3 The Internal Business Barriers .....	14
2.2.2 The Glass Escalator.....	16
2.2.3 The Glass Cliff .....	16
2.3 Social role theory .....	17
2.4 Theoretical criticism .....	18
2.5 Summary of the theories .....	18
<b>3. Methodology .....</b>	<b>21</b>
3.1 Research method.....	21
3.1.1 Qualitative method .....	21
3.1.2 Justification of the choice of research method .....	21
3.1.3 Case Study.....	22
3.2 Developing the theoretical framework.....	22
3.2.1 Literature sources .....	22
3.3 Method for empirical data collection .....	23
3.3.1 Primary sources .....	23
3.3.2 Sampling method.....	23

3.3.3 Choice of sample .....	24
3.3.4 Execution of empirical data collection .....	24
3.4 Method for empirical data analysis .....	26
3.4.1 Credibility of the findings .....	27
3.5 Ethical position .....	28
<b>4. Contextual background .....</b>	<b>29</b>
4.1 Development of gender equality in the countries .....	29
4.1.1 Sweden .....	29
4.1.2 Estonia .....	31
4.2 Summary of the countries' development of gender equality .....	34
4.3 Swedbank .....	35
4.3.1 Policy on gender equality and diversity .....	35
<b>5. Empirical data .....</b>	<b>37</b>
5.1 Interviews .....	37
5.1.1 The Swedish women .....	37
5.1.1.1 Background of the respondents .....	37
5.1.1.2 Summary of the Swedish interviews .....	38
5.1.2 The Estonian women .....	40
5.1.2.1 Background of the respondents .....	40
5.1.2.2 Summary of the Estonian interviews .....	41
5.2 Summary of the interviews .....	45
<b>6. Analysis .....</b>	<b>47</b>
6.1 Development of gender equality .....	47
6.2 Advancement .....	47
6.3 Parental leave .....	49
6.4 Opportunities .....	51
6.5 Characteristics of managers .....	52
<b>7. Conclusions .....</b>	<b>54</b>
7.1 Empirical and theoretical contributions .....	54
7.2 Suggestions for future research .....	55
7.3 Implications for practitioners .....	57
<b>8. References .....</b>	<b>58</b>
8.1 Literature sources .....	58

8.2 Oral sources .....	65
8.3 Figures.....	65
8.4 Tables .....	66
<b>8. Appendix .....</b>	<b>67</b>
8.1 Interview guide .....	67
8.2 Interview questions sent to respondents before the interviews.....	68

# 1. Introduction

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*In this chapter the reader is given a background and introduction to the discussed topic; why female middle managers do not reach top positions. This is followed by a problematization of the subject. The chapter continues with the purpose of the study and the research question which are the basis of this paper. Finally this chapter ends with limitations of the study as well as a summary of the thesis structure.*

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## 1.1 Background

### 1.1.1 Women's underrepresentation in top positions

Historically women have fought for gender equality and this is exemplified by managerial positions as men are still over-represented at the highest positions in politics, business and religious institutions (Western 2013). Statistics Sweden's data shows there are more male top managers than female top managers in Sweden (Statistics Sweden n.d.). Though, a study by Women's Business Research Institute (Wombri) shows a steady increase of women in top positions year by year (Women's Business Research Institute n.d.a). However, based on enterprises listed on OMX stock exchange on the 31 of December 2011, the growth is very slow (ibid). Hirdman (1988) discusses women's subordination in organizations. Her theory about gender power refers to the principle of breaking up between male and female. She states that by splitting women and men, it results in different tasks which are performed at different levels in the hierarchy; men get tasks executed at top positions and women tasks executed at lower positions in the organizations.

### 1.1.2 Career barriers toward female managers

According to Wombri there is a will and ability from the women to advance but the problem that keeps them from developing their career is the barriers and the resistance they meet in their working life (Sällberg 2004). One interesting aspect is that half of all female managers believe there are barriers for them in their career while 70 percent of all male managers believe barriers for women, and their career development, do not even exist (Women's Business Research Institute n.d.b). According to the famous *Glass Ceiling Theory* many women meet invisible barriers that prevent them from career progression. It can be barriers as



lack of skills, inner barriers as lack of self-confidence and barriers related to having children; as maternity leave (Renstig n.d., p.3). Another glass theory, called the *Glass Escalator Theory*, means it is easier for men to do career and get top positions. The theory believes women need to climb the career ladder while men are taking the escalator to the top (Andersson 2015). A third theory called the *Glass Cliff Theory* means that women only get top positions in organizations that are in a very bad situation; that is impossible to manage (Andersson 2014). In an article, Muhonen (2010) suggested that women need to be twice as good as men to get a senior position.

### **1.1.3 Gender equality in Sweden and Estonia**

The topic, why female middle managers do not get top positions, is a global discussion and how far countries have come in their development regarding gender equality differs. In some countries female leadership does not even exist. This study is a comparative study, which compares the differences in female middle managers' career opportunities in the Swedish and Estonian banking sector. Estonia is interesting to look at because of its history as a part of the Soviet Union. During a long time, Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union but in 1991 they became independence (Karau 2011, p 14). Since then, the planned economy has been dismantled by a market economy and today Estonia is a small but prosperous country (Lambert 2013). In The Global Gender Gap Report 2014, produced by the World Economic Forum (WEF), Sweden is ranked as fourth out of 142 countries with a score of 0.8165 (1.0 = equality and 0.0 = inequality) when comparing gender equality. In the same report Estonia received 0.702 points, which does not seem to be a big difference, but in the ranking Estonia has place 62 (Hausman et al. 2014). By the 43 European countries that was investigated in the report, Estonia ended up on a 28th place in 2014 and positioned itself in a worse place than its neighbors Latvia and Lithuania, who positioned themselves at eleventh and twenty-third place when comparing the European countries (Hausman et al. 2014). Looking at the gender pay gap, Estonia was in 2010 the country in Europe with the highest relative difference in the average gross hourly earnings between the sexes on 30 per cent (European Commission 2014), and the greatest gender gap pay in Estonia was in 2012 founded in the finance and insurance sector (Statistics Estonia 2014b). In this industry the gap between men and women's wages was 41.8 per cent (ibid). Sweden is an interesting country to compare with since it has come a long way in its work with gender equality. But it is important to notice, there is still a long way to go before we can talk about gender equality; often it is not as good as we think. If we

for example look at the number of female managers at top positions in the Swedish listed companies, we find a clear minority of women (5 per cent) and a clear majority of men (95 per cent) (Statistics Sweden 2014a).

## **1.2 Problem discussion**

What we do know is that women are underrepresented at the highest positions, but we do not know if it depends on historical reasons or contemporary/present barriers. By examining possible reasons and figure out the different barriers that exist, it can facilitate the solution to get more women at higher positions in organizations faster. If women do not know what barriers that exist, it is hard for them to climb over the obstacles in order to develop their careers. It is therefore necessary to know the underlying factors. Apart from barriers that prevent women's career progression, there are also gender differences that prevent the women. Some of them are socially constructed (Lindgren 1985), but some of them seem to be related to the biological sex, for example personal qualities (Colwill & Vinnicombe 1995). According to The Glass Escalator Theory, it seems to be easier for men to get top positions, but what the theory does not raise is the reasons for why women need to fight harder. This is another aspect to examine. Briefly this study will look at different theories related to female managers' career opportunities and compare them with female managers in practice; if there is a difference or if they are consistent. Since the study is comparative and we know Sweden is in the forefront, when looking at gender equality compared with Estonia (Hausman et al. 2014), it is interesting to compare the differences in career opportunities between Swedish and Estonian female middle managers.

## **1.3 The purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study is to examine female middle managers' career opportunities in the banking sector in Sweden and Estonia and how they differ in the selected countries. The study is a case study at Swedbank and it looks at potential barriers women meet in their careers and what prevent them from advancement. The study is conducted through the perspective of female managers.

## **1.4 Research question**

The study intends to answer the following question:

*What affects female middle managers' career opportunities in the banking sector in Sweden compared with Estonia?*

## **1.5 Delimitations of the study**

The study focus on what affects female middle managers' career opportunities but will not go further into a discussion about all the barriers female middle managers meet. Ethnic minorities, age related barriers and barriers related to sexual orientation are not included. There are also geographical limitations since the study only examine one company (Swedbank), two countries (Sweden and Estonia) and one sector (the banking sector). It is therefore impossible to generalize since career opportunities might differ depending on country, company and industry. Further limitation is the perspective of the study. Interviews have only been done with female managers and therefore lack opinions from male managers. Since the study particularly is aimed to look at the problem through the eyes of female middle managers, this is not seen as a problem.

## 1.6 Thesis structure

The thesis consists of seven chapters; *introduction, theory, methodology, contextual background, empirical data, analysis* and *conclusions*. They are followed by a *reference list* and *appendix*. Below follows a brief description of each chapter.

*Introduction* - The opening/first chapter introduces the problem and the purpose of the study for the reader. It also presents the research question. Also earlier research within the area is discussed and the limitations of the study are mentioned.

*Theory* - The theoretical part of the thesis reviews relevant theories for the subject, the problem and the purpose of the study. There are also arguments for the selection of the theories and this part of the thesis gives the reader definitions of central terms. In the end, of the theoretical part, is a summary of the selected theories.

*Methodology* - In this chapter, a justification of the choice of method is given and how the data has been gathered. The method is closely linked to the problem, purpose and theory.

*Contextual background* - The Contextual background gives the reader information about the two countries, Sweden and Estonia, and the selected company, Swedbank.

*Empirical data* - The empirical data gives a review of the qualitative interviews with the female managers of the selected company.

*Analysis* - In the analysis processes and presents the interpretation of the theories and the empirical data.

*Conclusion* - The result of the study. It includes our conclusions based on the analysis and presents limitations and lack of knowledge that can be interesting for future research to examine.

*Reference list* – The reference list presents literature, journals and other sources being used for the study.

*Appendix* - In appendix, the reader finds the interview guide which can give the reader a deeper insight into the empirical data and the analysis. This chapter also includes the specific questions that were sent to the respondents before the interviews.

## 2. Theory

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*In this chapter the relevant theories, developed by previous studies, are gathered. Initially there is an explanation of the structural and social perspective of gender. This is followed by a review of the various glass theories. After this, a description of The Social Role Theory follows. Finally, the chapter ends with theory criticism and a summary of the various theories that have been reviewed.*

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### 2.1 Structural and social perspective of gender

In the 1970's researchers started to look at organizing from the perspective of gender. It began with structuralism and followed by socialism. The *structural perspective* explains gender differences from different preconditions. It means that the gender differences depends on the structure of the work; which tasks women and men have at different levels in the hierarchy (Eriksson-Zetterquist et al. 2012). Kanter (1977) examined in which positions men and women worked and which opportunities they had. According to Kanter it was the work that produced the individuals and to change differences in gender at the workplace, the organization needs to be changed, not the individual. In Kanter's study she wrote about 3 structures that discourage the thought about similar opportunities. It was the opportunity structure, power structure and frequency structure. According to the *opportunity structure* it was a person's position in the organization that gives them different opportunities to build a career. The *power structure* was manifested by the ability to get things done, to have resources available to reach goals. Though, when a woman has established a good power position, she is no longer a representative of a gender category. She is no longer seen as a woman, but rather as a person with power. The *frequency structure* showed that a person who belongs to a minority, that is less than 15% according to Kanter (1977), is seen as a representative for its gender category and as a symbol rather than an individual. A minority means a skewed distribution and to be balanced a group needs to have a distribution of at least 60/40. This is based on the concept of tokenism (Kanter 1977). The underrepresented group is then called token and to be seen as a representative for something different, it is followed by three consequences; *visibility*, *exclusion* and *assimilation* (Kanter 1977). The person who is being different is more visible. If the person makes a mistake, the person will be a

representative for the whole gender group but if the person does something good, it will be seen as an exception. If an outsider enters an organization, the domestic culture will be strengthened and the outsider's culture will be excluded. There will be a clear contrast between the outsider's culture and the domestic culture. A third consequence is assimilation and it is about a person who belongs to a minority. This person only becomes an example of how the majority pictures the minority group (Kanter 1977).

A study initiated by Lipman-Blumen (1976), and developed by Kanter (1977), was about homosocial reproduction. It signified that men often recruit men because they have more similar qualities and are easier to work with, which results in more men and fewer women at the top. It can be seen as a barrier for women to get top positions. Women, instead, have a more heterosocial behavior and recruit both women and men. They seem to have it easier to adapt to different persons. Women and men tend to have different qualities (Colwill & Vinnicombe 1995). Men are more focused on results and competition and have a more analytical ability. Women, on the other hand, are more focused on relations and cooperation (ibid). Wahl (1992) thinks the differences in qualities and interests limit women's opportunities and also argues that another thing that prevents women to get to the top is that organizations do not have enough experience of female top management.

In 1990 researchers started to talk about *social constructivism*. Instead of the thought that an organization makes the individuals, the social perspective thinks culture and opinions form and create individuals and make the individuals (Eriksson-Zetterquist et al. 2012). According to Acker (1992) gender differences are created and confirmed by cultural symbols. Acker (1992) also argues that it is the individuals in the organization that create the gender differences.

## **2.2 Glass theories**

### **2.2.1 The Glass Ceiling**

Who actually coined the term glass ceiling is not clear but one of the first times it was mentioned in print was in 1984 (Barett et al. 2009). The expression means there is a transparent barrier that makes the highest positions in full view to the women who work at lower and middle positions in companies but which prevents women to reach the highest part of the corporate ladder, regardless of what qualifications they possess (The Economist 2009). Because of this phenomenon, the Glass Ceiling Commission was founded in 1991. They are

talking about three different levels of barriers that affect the glass ceiling; *Societal Barriers*, *Government Barriers* and *Internal Business Barriers* (U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission 1995).

### **2.2.1.1 Societal Barriers**

The Societal Barriers are divided into two subheadings; The Supply Barrier and The Difference Barrier (U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission 1995). *The Supply Barrier* refers to the fact that many women and minority groups never even are let in through the doors of big companies and thus never even get the chance to look up at the glass ceiling. *The Difference Barrier*, on the other hand, suggests that stereotypes and prejudices are created by, among other things, the media and entertainment industry and cannot be completely erased by the companies themselves (ibid). But Morrison (1992) argues that the biggest obstacle to corporate advantage is stereotypes and prejudices about someone's ability and qualification. Therefore, it is important for companies to work towards this. The Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) further argues that the best way to do this is to pay attention and work towards three types of differences; cultural differences, gender differences and color-based differences. As this thesis deals with the situation of women, we will only look further into the gender differences. These differences refer to expected roles of women, as for example the ones being responsible for the family rather than high-ranking position in companies.

### **2.2.1.2 The Government Barriers**

According to the Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) there are three Governmental barriers: lack of monitoring law enforcement, weakness in the gathering of data related to employment and problem with the reporting and presentation of information related to the glass ceiling. To overcome the glass ceiling barriers, the federal action programs must monitor law enforcement and intervene with sanctions when the laws are not followed. It is, for the government, important to deliver relevant information that is necessary to closely monitor the situation for women. Further, it is important to provide the general public with this data in an appropriate format. This since it, due to The Glass Ceiling Commission (1995), is important for the government to have an educational role rather than just collect data and monitor.

### **2.2.1.3 The Internal Business Barriers**

It would probably be difficult to find a male manager who does not claim that inclusion and diversity is important in a company. Despite this, the Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) submits women experience numerous obstacles when they want to advance. Because of this it is argued that business managers do not live according to their alleged views on integration.

According to the Glass Ceiling Commission (1995), in order to understand why this difference exists, two questions need to be answered:

*What is the underlying cause that we must address?*

*What are the internal/structural barriers that we must dismantle to remove the glass ceiling?*

Through independent research and their own focus groups, the Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) suggests that one of the underlying factors, to why the glass ceiling exists, is that there is a perception of loss. White male managers at the top and middle level experience that by including minorities and women in management they would reduce their influence, power and opportunities. Furthermore the Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) suggests it is the business leaders who realized that their priorities are not always consistent with their middle and top managers' priorities that are most successfully to point out the internal obstacles that exist for women and minorities.

To sort out the second question, the Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) has identified three internal barriers; The Outreach and Recruitment Barriers, The Corporate Climate Barriers and The Pipeline Barriers. *The Outreach and Recruitment Barriers* are built on the idea that the recruiters do not really know where to look for women when new posts are to be filled.

Furthermore, many women find it difficult to get into the community and culture at their place of work. These barriers are called *the Corporate Climate Barriers*. The Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) claims that women feel excluded from both formal and informal networks that facilitate advancement. Some feel they are excluded from activities such as going out for a beer, playing golf or work out with the manager and this is perceived in turn as a barrier to advancement. They also claim that women find it difficult to identify and follow the norms in male-dominated business environment (ibid). Even though they manage to adapt to these standards, many of them still experience that they cannot overcome the barrier of exclusion.

*The Pipeline Barriers* suggest there is more than one glass ceiling that blocks the way to the top for women and minorities. According to The Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) it is important for corporate leaders, as CEOs, to clearly show that they require responsibility in these matters in order to prevent women and minorities getting trapped underneath these glass ceilings. Some of the major barriers identified by the Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) are



the lack of mentoring and management training, different standards for performance evaluation as well as little or no access to informal networks of communication.

### **2.2.2 The Glass Escalator**

The glass escalator is a concept that says that men in female-dominated occupations are advancing faster and higher up in the organization than women. Williams (1992) argues that men are "kicked upstairs" to professional roles that are considered to be more masculine. The jobs that are considered to be better suited for men also tend to be jobs with more prestige and higher wages (ibid). Williams (1992) also argues that it is not uncommon that men, against their will, feel compelled to work in these professional roles. Maume (1999, pp. 488-489) means that women in occupations dominated by women feel overlooked and that their skills are not being utilized. Furthermore Maume (1999, pp. 488-489) argues that this leads to failure in trying to reach higher positions as well as to lower wages. Due to this phenomenon one could imagine that women would attract the same kind of attention in male-dominated occupations. But as previously being described, the glass ceiling shows the opposite.

### **2.2.3 The Glass Cliff**

Judge (2003) asserts, despite the general positive view of more women taking place in corporate boards, that female leadership affects businesses negatively. To support her argument, she refers to an index from the Cranfield School of Management. This data suggests that companies with female leaders would underperform in comparison with firms with male leaders (Judge 2003).

However Ryan and Haslam (2005) argue, because of some methodological problems, this assumption is not correct. Some of the problems they point out is that Judge does not use any statistical analysis but only states six of the ten companies studied in the index from the Cranfield School of management, that Judge supports her article on, underperformed. Furthermore, Ryan and Haslam (2005) argue that women in leadership and corporate performance are too broad and loose definitions. They believe Judge does not take into account how the number of women on the boards of the companies in question has changed or how long these women have been on the board. The authors instead argues that women are recruited to these positions as companies already are in trouble and in many cases are impossible to rescue. Furthermore Ryan & Haslam (2005) states that, at times of general financial decline, the companies that recruited women experienced an upswing and that

Judge's (2003) assertion that female managers could be linked to the decline in corporate performance therefore is incorrect.

## 2.3 Social role theory

*Social Role Theory* emerged in 1980 and is about behavioral differences between women and men (Eagly 1987). According to the theory, differences in behavior occur from gender stereotypes, which are typical roles related to gender (Strodbeck & Mann 1956). Stereotypes are divided into two groups; injunctive norms and descriptive norms. *Injunctive norms* include desirable behaviors while *descriptive norms*, instead are more related to how people actually behave (Cialdini & Trost 1998). According to gender roles, men tend to perform more task related behaviors and women more relational and social behaviors (ibid). The theory is based on how the gender expectations have developed over time. Back in time, women were seen as homemakers and men as breadwinners (Eagly & Wood 2012). Girls were raised by learning domestic skills adapted for the household like preparing food and sewing while boys were raised by skills more useful in the future working life (Cejka & Eagly 1999). Men tend to have more agent qualities and women more communal personal skills (Glick 1991). By looking at gender roles cross-culturally, there is a difference between these since they are affected by different cultures and the view of gender roles depends on which society is being examined (House 1995). The gender roles depend on when and where they are viewed; in which society and during which time. In an agriculture society men can have an advantage in terms of speed and strength, but such qualities are less important in a post-industrial society (Murdock & Provost 1973). Which qualities are demanded depends on the situation. Sometimes feminine physical qualities as sweet are more important and in other situations masculine, result oriented, leadership qualities are valued higher (Cejka & Eagly 1999). Talking about gender roles also includes facilitations and limitations. A woman can for example be limited because of her need to take care of the children (Eagly & Wood 1999). It may for example limit her to exercise flexibility tasks; tasks that require traveling etcetera. The different roles also tend to have an impact on the status. A woman's domestic role seems to be lower in status compared with a man's breadwinner role. (Eagly et al. 2000).

A theory called *Role Congruity Theory* (RCT) comes partly from the Social Role Theory. RCT is about the society's view of a leader related to gender and prejudices toward female management. People seem to have dissimilar beliefs about women and leadership but similar beliefs about men and leadership (Eagly & Karau 2002). Women are more likely to adopt

collaborative and empowering leadership styles and men more controlling styles (Williams 2012).

## **2.4 Theoretical criticism**

To explain gender differences it is not enough to look at roles, situations and structures in an organization as Kanter considered. According to Lindgren (1985) it is also important to look outside the organization at inequalities in the society between women and men and Due Billing (2002) suggests that to eliminate gender differences, the society needs to change its perceptions of female management and stop generalizing.

One of the thesis's main theories, the Glass Ceiling Theory, has been criticized by Eagly and Carli (2007). They mean that the Glass Ceiling Theory is a bit too discouraging as some women actually get through the glass ceiling and, to some extent, reach top positions. Instead the authors argue that the labyrinth metaphor is better to describe the situation for women who want to get to the top. There is a path through the labyrinth to reach the goal but it's full of both expected and unexpected twists and turns as well as obstacles.

According to the theories that have been mentioned, it seems to be barriers and resistance for female middle managers that prevents them to get top positions in organizations. But since they emerged, the opposite has also been discussed and women seem to have an advantage in future, modern organizations (Williams 2012). Whilst modern organizations meet the increased globalization, they seem to demand a more feminine type of leadership to emphasize the participative and open communication needed for success (Volberda 1998). It seems to be a shift away from the traditional and masculine leader stereotype toward a more feminine type. Koenig et al (2011) suggested that leadership perceptions are becoming less masculine over time as a result from women's increased participation in leadership positions. Even Helgesen (1990) argued that a woman's qualities will be an advantage in the post-heroic leadership world of the 21st century as organizations become more humane.

## **2.5 Summary of the theories**

To answer and analyze the research question, *what affects female middle managers' career opportunities in the banking sector in Sweden compared with Estonia*, the study need to have underlying theories which can be compared with the reality.

To examine why there are more men at top positions, the study first of all needs to know how differences are produced and what should be changed. Kanter (1977) suggested that, according to the structural perspective, it is the work that produces the individuals and to change differences in gender at workplaces, organizations need to be changed. Other researchers suggested that in order to eliminate gender differences we need to look outside organizations at inequalities in the society and the society needs to change its perceptions of female management (Lindgren 1985; Due Billing 2002). Researchers have also talked about social constructivism which signifies that gender is made by different contexts and different behaviors between women and men (Eriksson-Zetterquist et al. 1992).

To figure out why women are underrepresented at the highest positions the study will need to look at the resistance women meet, both related to the country's history and the existing barriers. A famous expression about women's underrepresentation in top positions is The Glass Ceiling Theory. It refers to the invisible barriers that prevent women's career progression (The Economist 2009). The Glass Ceiling Theory has through the ages resulted in new glass theories, for example The Glass Escalator and The Glass Cliff. The Escalator (Williams 1992) refers to men's fast advancement up in organizations and women's slower pace. The Cliff (Ryan & Haslam 2005) refers to the thoughts that women only are recruited to top positions at companies that already are in trouble and in many cases impossible to save.

To know what affects female middle managers' career opportunities it is relevant to know which the gender differences are. Social role theory highlights associations concerning behavioral differences between women and men (Eagly 1987). The theory includes terms as stereotypes and behavior of gender (Strodbeck & Mann 1956). To change the view of female management in organizations and the society it is necessary to know the prejudices toward female managers (Eagly & Karau 2002). The Role Congruity Theory is about a society's view of a leader related to gender and prejudices toward female managers (ibid).

**Table 1 – Summary of the theories**

	Brief summary of the theories
Structural and social perspective of gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kanter 1977</li> <li>- Structural: The work produces the individuals</li> <li>- Social: Gender is made by different contexts and behaviors between women and men</li> </ul>
Glass Ceiling Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Invisible barriers that prevent women's career progression</li> </ul>
Glass Escalator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Men's fast advancement up in organizations and women's slower pace</li> </ul>
Glass Cliff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women are only recruited to top positions at companies that already are in trouble and in many cases impossible to rescue</li> </ul>
Social Role Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Associations concerning behavioral differences between women and men</li> <li>- Stereotypes and characteristics of gender</li> </ul>
Role Congruity Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A society's view of a leader related to gender and prejudices toward female managers</li> </ul>

Source: Own compilation

## **3. Methodology**

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*This chapter describes the selected research method and why this has been selected. Later, is a review of how the empirical data was collected and analyzed. Finally, the chapter ends with a description of the ethical position.*

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### **3.1 Research method**

Methods are, according to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), specific ways that can be used in research in order to understand the world better. Methods are often divided into methods of data collection and methods of data analysis. Methodology, on the other hand, is sometimes called the philosophy of methods and provides a guide for the research process and research design (ibid).

#### **3.1.1 Qualitative method**

According to Bryman (2008) quantitative research is a strategy that emphasizes quantification regarding the collection and analysis of data. Jacobsen (2002) states that one of the advantages by a quantitative method is that it standardizes information and makes it easier to discuss. Furthermore Jacobsen (2002) argues the quantitative method is best suited when you want to describe the frequency or scope of a phenomenon.

Qualitative data is, on the other hand, a research strategy which usually attaches importance to words and not quantifying during the collection and analysis of data (Bryman 2008). Jacobsen (2002) argues that the researcher in this case, to a minor extent, has decided in advance what he or she should look for. The qualitative approach attaches importance to details, nuances and the uniqueness of each informant. Furthermore, Jacobsen means a qualitative method in general is intended to find out how people interpret and understand a given situation and appropriate when we want to ascertain what is in a concept or phenomena.

#### **3.1.2 Justification of the choice of research method**

The purpose of the study and the research question are considered to be exploratory and the study aims to find out what affects female middle managers' career opportunities in Sweden compared with Estonia. That type of problem requires a depth and intense method. This is one

reason why there should be a small sample size with depth rather than width (Jacobsen, 2002). The research question is therefore suitable for a qualitative method and according to Bryman and Bell (2013) a qualitative method should explore from the perspective of the respondents' eyes. Furthermore, Bryman and Bell (2013) mean that people are complex and dependent on their context. They proceed from their own beliefs and values which makes it important to see it from their eyes. However, there are weaknesses with an intensive and depth method. One of them is the impossibility to generalize. Since this study focus on two countries, Sweden and Estonia, it cannot therefore be applied in any other country and because of the small sample size, eight interviews at only one company, it cannot be generalized nor applied for the entire banking sector. The study therefore lacks external validity, according to Bryman and Bell (2013), and then it is unlikely that the same survey, at another organization, would generate similar response. But since the study does not aim to generalize what affects all female middle managers in all countries and at all organizations, it is not a problem. The purpose is instead to give an insight into the selected units; Swedbank in Sweden and Estonia.

### **3.1.3 Case Study**

In order to get a deeper picture of the banking sector in the two countries, a case study of Swedbank was conducted. According to Bryman and Bell (2015) the case that is being studied has to be relevant to the research. It is one reason why Swedbank was chosen. Swedbank is present in both countries and is also one of the biggest banks in the selected countries (Swedbank 2015, p.1). Another reason to why Swedbank was selected is that one of us is working and has contacts within the bank. In this way we could get in contact with several women in the bank and choose ourselves who we wanted to contact, instead of being dependent on who a contact person at the bank thought that we should meet.

Later in this chapter one can read about how we choose our samples for the interviews.

## **3.2 Developing the theoretical framework**

### **3.2.1 Literature sources**

To find out and to gather information for the various theories discussed, we have used search engines, databases, journals and books. The sample of literature has been carefully selected and we have examined the authenticity of the literature by examining the authors of the literatures and by looking at the date of origin to make sure the sources are relevant even

today. Furthermore we have always been looking at the original source since it leads to increased authenticity and avoids other authors' misjudgments.

### **3.3 Method for empirical data collection**

#### **3.3.1 Primary sources**

Primary sources, also called original sources, are sources created by the researcher and provides new information of a phenomenon (Quinlan 2011). Some of many examples of primary sources are diaries, audio recordings and interview transcriptions (ibid). Jacobsen (2002) argues the data collection is customized for the particular problem statement.

In this thesis primary sources, in the shape of interviews with female managers within Swedbank, has been used. A more detailed explanation of how these interviews were designed and conducted can be found later in this chapter. The purpose of doing these interviews was to compare the theoretical framework with the result of the interviews.

#### **3.3.2 Sampling method**

There are two different methods researchers can use to select their sample, in this case, who should be interviewed (Quinlan 2011). The first method is probability sampling and it means every individual has an equal probability of being selected (ibid). Furthermore Quinlan declares the sample taken is claimed to be representative for the entire population. The second sampling method is non-probability sampling and in this case the samples cannot, statistically, be representative of the population (ibid). According to Quinlan (2011) the non-probability sampling technique includes five types of techniques; judgmental sampling, quota sampling, snowball sampling and convenience sampling. By using the judgmental sampling technique the researcher selects who should participate in the study, based on what the sample can contribute to the research (ibid). When using the quota sample researcher uses quotas to fill the sample (ibid). When the scientists on the other hand makes use of the convenience technology, the researcher knows how many people the sample should consist of and then selects who should be included on the basis of which ones are easiest to include (ibid). The last technique, the snowball technique, means that the researcher selects a suitable person, which in turn recommends proper participants to the researcher (ibid).

In this paper the non-probability sampling technique is used. This is because only four women in each country were interviewed, and can therefore not be seen as representatives for the



entire population. As far as possible, we attempted to choose which women to interview; hence the judgmental sampling technique was used. By using this technique we wanted to avoid the risk of outsiders affecting which women we would come in contact with and thereby influence which answers we would get to our questions. However, our possibility to choose which women who would be interviewed was limited and as a complement, the snowball technique was used. Also the quota technique was used since we chose to interview an equal quota of women, four, in each country. Initially, the idea was to interview five women from each country, but since some of the women who first agreed to participate in the study had a very busy schedule this was not possible and four women from each country were interviewed. The authors chose to interview the same amount of women in both countries to get as fair results as possible.

### **3.3.3 Choice of sample**

Since we were interested in what affects female middle managers' career opportunities in Sweden compared to Estonia we started to look for a company operating in both countries. As one of us has contacts within Swedbank, this company was chosen. It gave us the opportunity to get in contact with and meet a wide range of women. We started off by choosing a number of women who we were interested in meeting and were then through these women assisted in contacting other relevant women.

The women who were chosen to be interviewed have different positions within the company, something we consciously have chosen in order to have a width where the women sit in different sectors within the bank. We have also chosen to interview women who possess higher positions than middle-management level. This was done in order to get a picture of how they experienced their career and whether they had encountered any obstacles. A brief presentation of the respondents can be found in the chapter for the empirical data. The reason why we only have been interviewing female managers depends on our purpose of the study.

### **3.3.4 Execution of empirical data collection**

#### *Preparation and execution of the interviews*

To find out how women in Swedbank perceive their career opportunities, a request regarding the interviews was sent via email to fourteen women in the bank, both in Sweden and Estonia. We received responses from all but was only able to go ahead with twelve of the women since the other two had no opportunity to set time off for an interview. When the interviews

approached, another four of the women pulled out due to lack of time and we then had the opportunity to interview eight women; four Swedish and four Estonian.

Quinlan (2011) argues that during personal interviews the interviewer could affect the respondent in some way. As an example the respondent could have prejudices toward the interviewer and that the answers could be affected by this. But in order to not miss out on impressions and other things you can intercept during a personal interview, the goal was to do as many interviews as possible face-to-face. Quinlan (2011) argues that the interviewer during this kind of interview can observe how the respondent reacts to different issues and, thanks to this, gets a feeling for what questions to go deeper into. Further, Jacobsen (2002) states that it is easier for the respondent to talk more openly about sensitive topics during this type of interviews. Though, since this is a time consuming interview method and often means that the investigator must move physically from place to place (Quinlan 2011; Jacobsen 2002), we were only able to conduct three of these eight interviews face-to-face. However, since we still wanted to have the opportunity to see the respondents during the conversations, all of the remaining interviews, except one, were made by means of video call programs as Skype and FaceTime. In that way, it was easier for us to understand what the respondent thought and also to come up with relevant follow-up questions. One of the respondents had no access to technology that allowed video calling and this interview was therefore held over phone. We are aware of the negative sides of a telephone interview, such as the interviewer losing the opportunity to observe how the respondent appears, and that it is easier for the respondent to lie during this type of interview (Jacobsen 2002). Although we considered that this option was better than to entirely miss out on the woman's opinions.

### ***Recording and transcription***

During all interviews, except two, both of us were attending. One of us was then leading the interview while the other took notes and, to some extent, came up with follow-up questions. Even though it is time consuming to be two interviewers it was considered more important to have two persons present so we could help each other with relevant follow-up questions. Besides notes all of the interviews, except one, were recorded with the help of a mobile phone. It is known this may have contributed to making the respondents speak less freely (Jacobsen 2002) but we, just as Jacobsen (2002), argue that the advantage of being able to go back and listen to the conversation one more time was stronger.

### *Forming interview questions*

As we were interested in the respondents' own perceptions and the aim was to make them speak freely, it was chosen to try to keep the interview relatively open and in a simple language. Quinlan (2011) argues that in qualitative research the researcher shapes the research loosely to allow the respondent to shape the information that is collected. In order to, more or less, structure the interview, a script, called interview guide, can be written (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014). The guide may contain some topics to be discussed or detailed and carefully formulated questions (ibid). We decided which topics we wanted to talk about and thereafter wrote open and neutral questions based on these topics. Some women were talking very freely and covered many of the questions just by answering one of them, while instead other women just answered the questions that were asked. In the latter cases we had to use the more questions and because of this some of the interviews became a little more structured than others. However, we aimed to keep the questions, in all of the interviews, open and to remain neutral during the interviews.

### *Language restrictions*

Since four of the women did not speak Swedish, four of the interviews were held in English. Our perception is that these interviews went well, but we are also aware of the fact that neither the respondents nor we have English as our mother tongue and that it might have contributed to different perceptions of the issues.

## **3.4 Method for empirical data analysis**

Analyzing the empirical data in a qualitative analysis is often a very time consuming process (Holme & Solvang 1997). This is because the researcher often has an extensive amount of data to be sorted and analyzed (Jacobsen 2002).

Since it was taken detailed notes during each interview, we already had a detailed description of the conversation immediately after the interviews. Since all interviews, except one, were recorded we had the possibility to listen through the interviews as many times as needed to fill in the gaps we found in the notes. Since it is very time consuming to write down exactly everything that is being said during an interview, we chose to sort out what was not considered relevant to the research question. We then categorize the data and sorted it in different themes in order to structure the content. According to Holme & Solvang (1997), these themes often emerge when reading the data, as they return more than others. But they

may also appear when you want to compare the theoretical perception with the empirical material (ibid). We then examined the data and connected various statements to the different themes in order to make it easier to analyze the data. This approach is in good agreement with the thematic analysis raised by Bryman and Bell (2015). After this we started to analyze the material in order to see how and by what the women's career opportunities were affected. We partly analyzed the women's answers with the help of the theories, but there was also a comparative analysis of the responses from the women in the two countries.

### **3.4.1 Credibility of the findings**

During this type of surveys it is always important to try to avoid problems with validity and reliability. When examining the validity one can for example confront the respondents who were interviewed to make sure they recognize themselves in the presented result. In this way, the researchers can ensure they did not misunderstand the respondents (Jacobsen 2002). The reliability of an investigation may be affected by the selected research method. Respondents may hide their true opinion in interviews because they are worried about the consequences that may follow if they say too much. The environment that the interview takes place in, as well as the respondent's perception of the interviewer, is other examples of what may have an impact on reliability (ibid).

Since the interviews were relatively open, the respondents were given the opportunity to talk freely about the topics that were raised and could therefore clearly explain the basis for their answers and how they felt about the discussed topics. This type of interviews strengthens the survey validity. However, only a small number of women were interviewed, which probably led to a biased selection. Therefore, the results of this survey cannot be considered valid for an entire population.

In order to obtain reliable answers from the respondents, the interviewed women will be anonymous to readers of this essay. Since the researchers were able to see the respondents, either directly or through a video camera, during all interviews except one, they had the opportunity to read the respondents' facial expressions and body language. Due to this the reliability is enhanced. All the interviewed women were at their workplace, except from one who was at home. According to Jacobsen (2002) these may be considered to be environments where the interviewee most likely is comfortable. By interviewing in a familiar environment,

we aimed to avoid that their behavior would change because they were unfamiliar with the surroundings.

### **3.5 Ethical position**

It is important to have an ethical position when conducting interviews in the exploratory purpose. Participants should be treated well and they should have chosen themselves to take part in the study (Jacobsen 2002). They should participate by free will and thus not be there because, for example, their boss told them to (ibid). To get as fair results as possible, it is not preferable that the respondent receive any form of compensation and, out of respect to the respondent, the interviewers should also adhere to the time agreed (ibid). In order for the participant to choose freely whether he wants to be in the study or not, Jacobsen (2002) argues the respondent must have full information about what the purpose of the survey is.

All participants in this study were contacted personally by us and have chosen to participate by their own will. There was no type of compensation. The respondents were given an explanation, and had the opportunity to ask questions about the purpose of the study, via email. We were open with all information except what theories that formed the basis for the investigation. This was done in order to avoid tilting the respondents' answers. We still consider that the respondents received sufficient information to understand the main purpose of the survey and how the results would be used.

## 4. Contextual background

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*In this chapter the reader is given a picture of the two countries' gender situation and the recent development in this area. Furthermore, it is followed by a brief description of Sweden and their equality policy.*

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### 4.1 Development of gender equality in the countries

#### 4.1.1 Sweden

During the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup>- and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century questions about women's right became important in Sweden (Manns & Kyle n.d.) Swedish women then started to take place in the parliament and in 1985, 31 per cent of the parliamentarians were women while 69 per cent were male. In 2010, the proportion of women had increased to 45 per cent and the proportion of males declined to 55 per cent (Statistics Sweden 2014b, p 5).

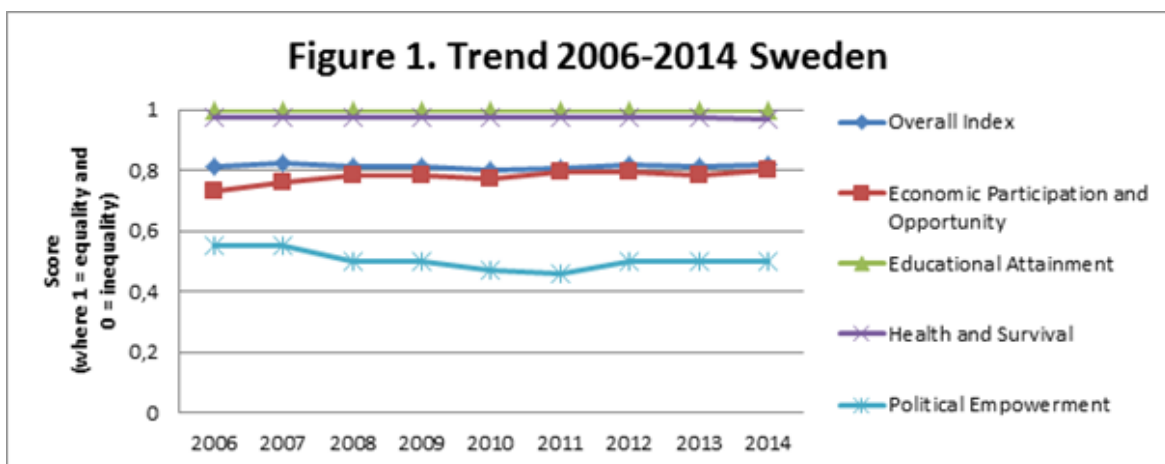
In 1947 it was regulated that women and men who are state employees would receive equal pay for equal work. This was in 1960 followed by the Confederation of Employers and workers' collective organizations LO's (Landsorganisationen i Sverige) decision to abolish the separate wage rates for women within five years (Sternar & Molander 2011, p 31).

In 1995 it was decided that one month of the parental leave should be reserved for each parent and these cannot be transferred between the parties (Sternar & Molander 2011, p 32) In the current situation the parents are entitled to 480 days of parental benefit for a child and in the cases when parents have joint custody, 60 days are reserved for each parent and are not transferable (Försäkringskassan n.d.).

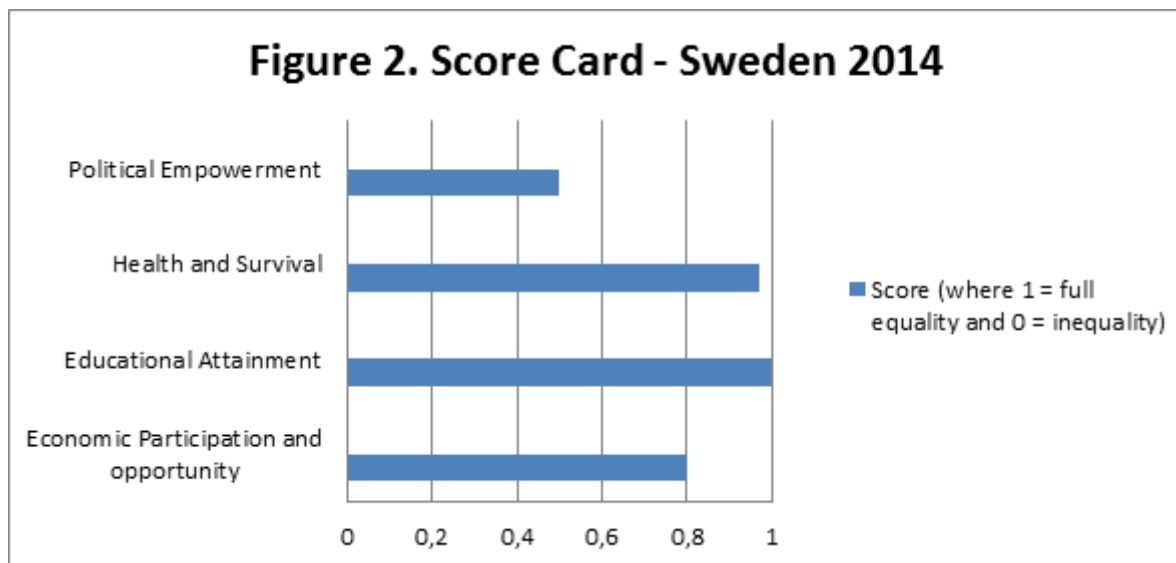
In 1991 the Equality Act was issued in Sweden and came into force in 1992 (Sveriges Riksdag n.d.a). The law was gender neutral and therefore intended to combat discrimination of both women and men in their working life. However it was mainly aimed to improve the conditions for working women (ibid). The idea behind the law was that every human being would have the right to develop from his or her own conditions and not according to which sex you belong to (ibid). The law was rewritten and became stricter in both 1998 and 2001 and finally was replaced in 2009 by the Discrimination Act (Sveriges Riksdag n.d.b). The new law covers discrimination on grounds of sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation,

ethnicity and religion. The Discrimination Act is broader than the Equality Act and includes protection against discrimination on more areas of society than previously; in health care and social services for example (ibid).

According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2014, Sweden is currently in fourth place when comparing the observance of the equality situation between 142 countries worldwide (Hausman et al. 2014). In 2006, Sweden had 0.8133 points, where 1 means full equality and 0 means inequality (Greig et al. 2006). By 2014 this number had increased to 0.8165 points (Hausman et al. 2014) In 2006, Sweden topped the ranking list, see figure 1 for the Swedish development, and the country was closely followed by its Nordic neighbors Norway, Finland and Iceland (Greig et al. 2006). The equality situation in Sweden has not deteriorated, but the reason why they lost the first place is rather the improvement of these three Nordic neighbors (Hausman et al. 2014). When evaluating the countries and their gap between men and women, WEF takes four aspects in consideration; economic participation and opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment and health and survival (see figure 2). Despite the relatively high ranking Sweden still has a lot to work on before the country is gender equal. According to Statistics Sweden, women used 75 per cent of the parents' allowance days during 2013 while the men used 25 per cent. This has been changed from 1985, when women used 94 percent of the parental allowance while men only used 6 per cent (Statistics Sweden 2014b, p 5). Furthermore women spend more time than men on unpaid work, such as taking care of the household. In 2010, the Swedish women spent 3.5 hours per day on unpaid work while Swedish men put 2.5 hours of unpaid work. Though, the women have narrowed their time in unpaid work during the weekday since 1990 until 2014 with one hour. Men spent eight minutes more on unpaid work during one weekday in 2014 compared to 1990 (Statistics Sweden 2014b, p 5).



Source: Own compilation, numbers collected from The Global Gender Gap Report 2014



Source: Own compilation, numbers collected from The Global Gender Gap Report 2014

The employment rate in Sweden has fluctuated since 1987. At that time the employment rate for women was 82 per cent and 88 per cent for men. In 2000 this numbers had dropped for both women and men and the employment rate for women this year was 76 per cent and 81 per cent for men. By 2013, the employment rate had gone up for each group by one per cent. Women's employment rate was then 77 per cent while 82 per cent of the men had some type of employment (Statistics Sweden 2014b, p 5). In 1987, 45 per cent of the women and 6 per cent of the men, then, worked part time. In 2013 these numbers had changed. Women then worked 30 per cent part-time and men 11 per cent (Statistics Sweden 2014b, p 5). By looking at women's wages as a percentage of the men's wages, one could see that in 1994 it was 84 per cent. By 2012 it had risen to 86 per cent (Statistics Sweden 2014b, p 5).

#### 4.1.2 Estonia

In the beginning of World War II, year 1940, Estonia became a part of the Soviet Union (Estonian Embassy in Stockholm n.d.). In a discussion paper about Estonia, produced in 2013 by Istituto per la Ricerca Sociale (IRS) and ÖSB consulting for the European Commission, the authors argue that this history should have had an impact on the development of gender equality in Estonia. They mean Soviet also worked for consistent similarity, though in a different way than the contemporary democracies. It is argued that the work was something that was mandatory for everyone in the Soviet Union and there was not much room left for personal freedom of choice. Parental leave was only meant for mothers since the father's main role in the family was to raise money for the household (Istituto per la Ricerca Sociale & ÖSB consulting 2013). Karu (2011, p. 42) argues this imperative form of gender equality in

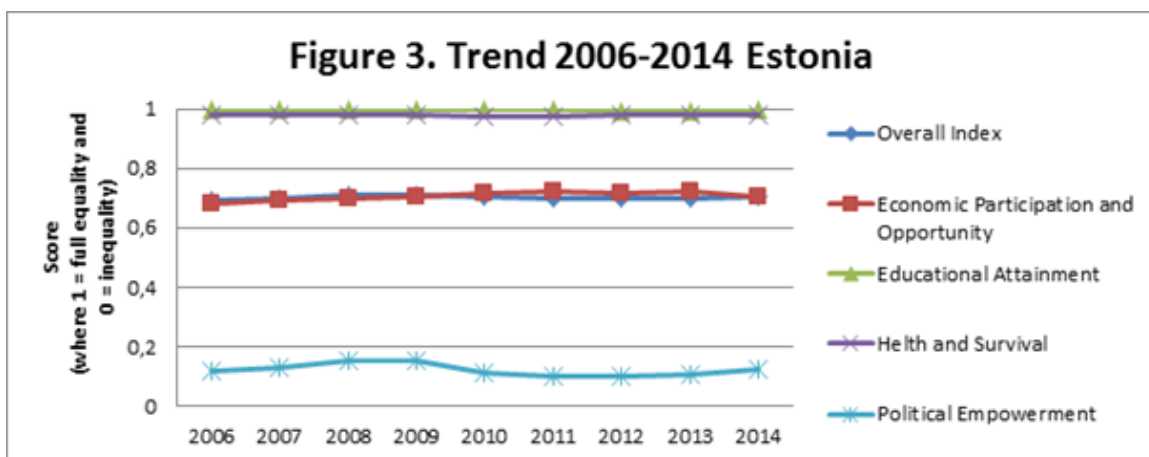


working life, and the fact it was forward to just work and not family life, made people reluctant to the gender equality and they because of this, fell back to the traditional gender division when the Soviet coercion disappeared.

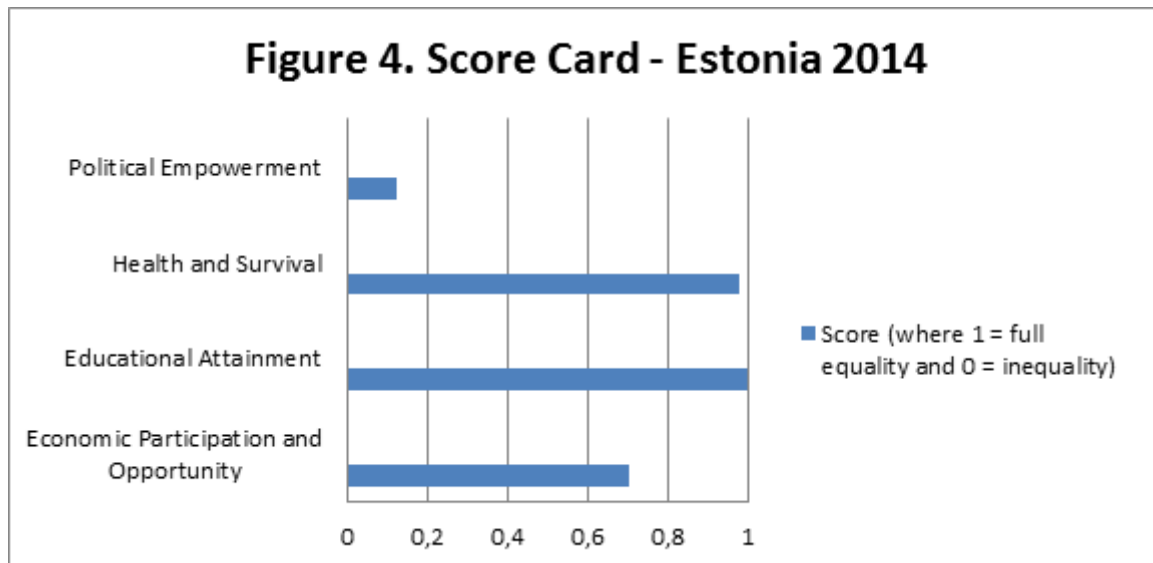
In 2004 the Estonian Parliament ratified the Gender Equality Act (Philips & Eamets 2004). This law aims to reduce gender-based discrimination throughout the society. Though, a big part focuses on the working life and employers are required by law to take certain responsibility to promote equality between the sexes (Istituto per la Ricerca Sociale & ösb consulting 2013, p.4). Furthermore one can read that article 11(2) stipulates that the employer shall collect relevant gender-disaggregated data to enable the relevant institution to verify that the principle of Equal Treatment is followed (ibid).

In 1982 the maternity leave in Estonia consisted of a one-year leave with a compensation equivalent to the minimum wage. In 1989, the maternity leave was extended to consist of three years. However, it took until 1991 before fathers were entitled to parental leave. This was, as previously mentioned, because of the Soviet rule in the country (Karu 2011, p.14).

In 2006, Estonia ended up on a twenty-ninth place out of 115 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report (Greig et al. 2006). In 2014, the country had fallen to a 62th place; however the report consisted of 142 countries that year (Hausman et al. 2014). In 2006, Estonia had 0.694 points, where 1 means full equality and 0 means inequality (Greig et al. 2006). By 2014 this had increased to 0.702 points (Hausman et al. 2014), as seen in figure 3 and 4. In 2014 Estonia placed themselves behind their neighbors Latvia and Lithuania. Latvia placed themselves at place 15 and Lithuania at place 44. By looking at the countries' scores one will see that Latvia in 2014 got 0.769 points, while Lithuania gained 0.721 points. Both countries had in 2014 increased their points compared to 2006 (Hausman et al. 2014) (Greig et al. 2006).



Source: Own compilation, numbers collected from The Global Gender Gap Report 2014



Source: Own compilation, numbers collected from The Global Gender Gap Report 2014

In 2013, the average unemployment rate in Estonia was 8.6 per cent. This number was 1.4 per cent lower than in 2012, when the average unemployment rate was 10.0 per cent. Furthermore were women's unemployment rates lower than men's in 2013. The rate of unemployment was 8.2 percent for women and 9.1 for men (Statistics Estonia 2014a). Additionally, women's earnings in Estonia were 24.8 per cent less than men's in 2013. According to Statistics Estonia (2014b) this meant the gender pay gap has grown by 0.2 percentage points from 2012. Compared with 2012, women's earnings in 2013 increased by 7.0 percent, while the same figure for men was 7.2 per cent (Statistics Estonia 2014b). The greatest gender pay gap was founded in the finance and insurance sector. In this industry there was a 41.8 per cent gap between men and women's wages (Statistics Estonia 2014b). According to Statistics Estonia (2014b) this number had decreased by 1.5 percentage points since 2012. The number of both men and women in the sector declined in 2013, though women's earnings per hour had increased with 3.0 percent in 2013 compared to 2012. For men, the increase was 5.8 percent (Statistics Estonia 2014b).

In 2010, 96 percent of women and 7 percent of men took parental leave. The most common reason why men did not take parental leave was because their wife/partner were the one taking parental leave. One reason why men did not take parental leave was because of financial reasons (the Population and Social Statistics Department of Statistics Estonia 2011, p. 75).

## 4.2 Summary of the countries' development of gender equality

Table 2 – Development of gender equality in Sweden and Estonia

	Sweden	Estonia
Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Questions about women's rights became important during the latter half of 19th and beginning of 20th century</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A part of the Soviet Union between 1940 and 1991</li> </ul>
Global Gender Gap report 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 4th place</li> <li>- 0,8165 points</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 62th place</li> <li>- 0.702 points</li> </ul>
Gender Equality Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1991</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2004</li> </ul>
Parental leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In 1995, one month was reserved for each parent</li> <li>- In the current situation, parents are entitled 480 days of parental leave (approximately 1.5 years)</li> <li>- Women used 75% and men 25% of parental leave (2013)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Since 1989 parental leave consists of 3 years</li> <li>- 96% of the women and 4% of the men used parental leave (2010)</li> </ul>
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In 2013 women's employment rate was 77% and men's 82%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In 2013 women's unemployment rate was 8.2% and men's 9.1%</li> </ul>
Wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In 2012 women's wages was 86% of the men's wages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In 2013 women's earnings was 28% less than men's</li> </ul>

Source: Own compilation

## **4.3 Swedbank**

Swedbank is a modern bank with its roots in the Swedish saving banks history, the Cooperative agricultural bank tradition and the Hansabank in the Baltic countries (Swedbank 2015, p.1). In 1820 the first Swedish savings bank was founded in Gothenburg (Swedbank n.d.a, p.4) and since 1991, when Estonia regained independent, Swedbank has been operating in Estonia too. The company has a broad customer base consisting of 8 million private customers and 600 000 corporate customers (Swedbank 2015, p.1). This makes Swedbank Sweden's largest bank in terms of customer numbers, which gives them a leading position in their other biggest markets, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The organization also operates in Norway, Finland, Denmark, the US, China, Luxembourg and South Africa (Swedbank 2015, p.1).

### **4.3.1 Policy on gender equality and diversity**

Swedbank has an explicit policy on gender equality and diversity and the purpose of the policy is to highlight Swedbank's work with issues as customer relations, business ethics and responsibility for social concerns as gender equality and diversity. By working with equality and diversity in the daily work, it constructs a culture where inequalities are used as potential factors of success that create business benefits (Swedbank n.d.b). Diversity contributes to a variety of experiences and competencies that in the end can raise profitability and keep the bank as an attractive employer. Gender equality and diversity can therefore work as a strategic tool. Swedbank's ambition is to have employees that mirror their customers and the market where they operate. It helps the company to understand its environment better and satisfy the customers' various needs better. An objective for Swedbank is to have employees with different backgrounds and experiences, and both women and men at all levels in the organization; from top management to employee level (Swedbank 2014, p.1). It is stated in the policy that the board, subsidiary boards and top management shall consist of a sufficient diversity including both gender and origin (Swedbank 2014, p.2).

Swedbank aim to provide all the employees with equal career opportunities through, for example, working conditions, salaries and benefits. The employee shall have the opportunity to combine work, private life and parenthood in an easy way. The purpose of the policy is to impact the work with gender equality and diversity more than the laws and agreements. Gender equality and diversity are promoted through the entire organization and each manager

is responsible to work with and present goals related to equality and diversity. In Swedbank there are already, according to the policy, a positive attitude toward gender equality and diversity since it is integrated in the day-to-day operations across the organization (Swedbank 2014, p.1).

## 5. Empirical data

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*This chapter starts with a presentation of the respondents and follows by a review of the interviews conducted for the study. The empirical findings are divided by country and different themes that will return in the analysis. In the end of this chapter, the reader finds a table which concludes the interviews with the Swedish and Estonian respondents.*

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### 5.1 Interviews

#### 5.1.1 The Swedish women

##### 5.1.1.1 Background of the respondents

*Respondent S1* is a 57 year old single woman with two grown up kids. She has been working in the bank for 32 years and today she is managing projects in group HR. She has a degree in international business and her working life started in the bank through a trainee program. During these 32 years she has been working in different managing positions in different areas of the bank. She is traveling about three days a week.

*Respondent S2* is a 45 year old married woman with two kids in their upper teens. She has been working at Swedbank since 2002 and is now working as HR partner in one of the regions in Sweden. After high school she was working with customer service in the banking sector for a year and after that she studied Human Resource at the university. Since she had a hard time to find a job in that area, she went back to work in the bank. After a while she took a job as a consultant manager at an employment agency and was, as mentioned earlier, recruited to Swedbank in 2002. Respondent S2 is, just as respondent S1, traveling a lot in her work but unlike S1, S2 is mostly traveling domestic.

*Respondent S3* is a 49 years old woman living with her partner and two stepchildren. She studied accounting at the university and started her career in the bank as a substitute. Today she is working at the regional headquarter and is responsible for the substitutes working in the bank as well as complaints from customers.

*Respondent S4* is a 50 year old married woman with three kids. She has been working in the bank since 1991 and is responsible for the bank's operations in one of the bigger regions. She

started her career in the bank on the corporate side and has been in a managing position since 2000. Today she is head of about 450 employees.

### **5.1.1.2 Summary of the Swedish interviews**

#### **Advancement**

None of the Swedish women express they are actively thinking on their future career. The common picture is instead that the personal development is more important. Both respondent S4 and S3 express they have always done their very best and mean that it is the reason for their advancement. Respondent S3 means it is important to have a fun job and that she wants to keep on doing things that she finds funny and developing. Respondent S2 means she does not feel any need of taking any further steps in her career at the moment. She describes her work as interesting and stimulating and that she keeps learning new things. Additionally she expresses a will to widen her competences. Further, respondent S3 argues that she is not thinking of barriers and states:

*“Barriers are a key and a question of mindset. It is all about seeing opportunities rather than barriers.”*

(Respondent S3 2015)

Though she thinks there are a lot of barriers and other unequal situations that she, or anyone else involved, is unaware of. Instead she thinks those things are done out of old habits and that no one reflects over it since it is the way it always has been.

#### **Parental leave**

Respondent S1 said the time when she got her kids was a bit tricky, but she explained that she used the situation as an opportunity to change her position in the company. One of the times when she changed position, she started as a risk manager. The reason why her boss wanted her to start at that specifically position was because he thought she would fix it better than the earlier managers, who had not been able to manage it. Respondent S4, on the other hand, did not experience having children as a barrier. Although she explains she was afraid that the bank would be disappointed at her, when she told them she was pregnant, since she just got a job in a managing position. But the bank only supported her.

## Opportunities

When S1 was questioned if she ever reflected over being a woman she answered that she mostly thought about it when she was younger and of childbearing age. Nowadays she does not reflect over it as much as before. When respondent S1 gets the same question she answers:

*“I have always been cautious not to get any disadvantages just because I am a woman.”*  
(Respondent S4 2015)

Further she says she is aware of how she expresses herself to get things done. She adapts her rhetoric after what the situation demands and makes sure not to appear as too feminine. When discussing opportunities respondent S1 thinks there are some differences but she cannot put the finger on which they are. Her experience is that if a woman does not want to advance it is usually because of social circumstances as being in charge of the household and taking care of the children. Respondent S4 is also discussing the fact that being the one taking the most responsibility at home might affect what opportunities a woman think she has. Though she argues that this do not have to be a problem if one have a good job and an employer that supports its employees. Respondent S3 never experienced any differences and she also hopes there are no differences. But she adds that she has been thinking about whether she would have chosen a different path if she had any children of her own.

All of the women stated that they are happy with the way the bank supports their personal development. Respondent S3 argues that if she would not have been happy with the way the bank has been supported her personal development, she would never have stayed for as long as she have. But she also addresses that she has been investing a lot by herself. None of the women answer they have felt that the bank is putting a different amount of effort on developing women and men. Although, in another part of the interview, respondent S1 states:

*“Since HR is such a women-dominated branch, I have experiences that men are being pushed and encouraged more than women.”*  
(Respondent S1 2015)

This is something she thinks is common in many female-dominated branches. Though, she does not think the same thing would happen to a woman in a male-dominated industry.

By looking at Swedbank, the Swedish women thought most of the female managers worked as middle level managers at offices, while most of the men were at the top in the organization. They also believed there are more women at the private side of the bank and more men at the



corporate side. All of the women are aware of the gender equality policy the bank has and mean it is being taken seriously in the bank. Although respondent S1 mentions that she does not think everyone in the bank are aware of the policy.

### **Characteristics of managers**

All of the interviewed women spoke about the ability to listen and understand as two of the most important personal qualities for a leader. Respondent S3 was saying a good leader should be a good role model and someone you can trust. She means it is important for a good leader to listen and being able to give the employees positive and constructive feedback. Besides the ability to listen respondent S1 argues that a good leader should be both focused and flexible. Additionally respondent S2 means that a good leader should be clear and keep the employees updated. Further she also emphasizes that it is important for a good leader to show appreciation and being able to adapt the working situation to different individuals' situations. As well as the other women, respondent S4 thinks a good leader should be able to listen to the employees and their situation. Further she stresses it is important to being able to share the responsibility. None of the women can say that there is a difference in how female and male leadership looks, but are instead arguing that it is more related to a person's personality rather than gender. Respondent S2 is also arguing that it is more a question about your personality but that women in general can be better listeners and have the ability to read people better than men. While talking about power exercise respondent S4 thinks this also is a question about personality rather than gender. Respondent S2 and S1 argue they experience that people in general are more tolerant with men doing mistakes. They also point out that a woman being strict is considered having a bad day while a man with the same attitude is seen as goal orientated. Additionally respondent S1 states that her feeling is that a man takes up more space than a woman. She gives an example from when they were measuring how much the different genders were speaking during a meeting, and even though the woman felt they were talking a lot afterwards, they were still not close speaking as much as the men.

## **5.1.2 The Estonian women**

### **5.1.2.1 Background of the respondents**

*Respondent E1* was born in Estonia in 1965 and has been employed in the Swedish part of Swedbank since 2004. Today she has a high position in the bank's treasury department and earlier she has held various managerial positions in the Estonian part of Swedbank. Before she started at the Swedish part of Swedbank, she worked in Finland as a management consultant

and as CEO for Tallinn Stock Exchange. Working as a female CEO for the Stock Exchange was something unique which made her stand out. This was one reason why she never had to break any glass ceilings. Respondent E1 has 2 master degrees; one which she took in Estonia in English literature and one from the U.S in International law and finance. As a top level manager, a normal day at work consists of many meetings and problem solving. She is divorced and has a 25 years old daughter. Even if the respondent nowadays works in Sweden, the interview intended to look at her Estonian perspective.

*Respondent E2* was born in Russia 1977 and has been employed in the Estonian part of the bank since 1996. Today she has a high position in the bank's Baltic treasury department. She has a higher education at the University of Tallinn in Economy. A normal working day consists of meetings and writing emails. She describes her task as very wide and not very specific. She is married and has two children.

*Respondent E3* was born in Estonia in 1969 and started her career in Swedbank in 1992 (then Hansabank). Today she works with specific corporations which include back office for trade and finance. She is responsible for four countries; Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden. She has a master's degree in Economics which she took in Estonia. Nowadays she is single and has two sons.

*Respondent E4* was born in 1972 in Estonia and has been employed in Swedbank for more than 20 years. During her time in the bank she has been working in many different areas with different tasks. For example, she has been a specialist in marketing. Nowadays she is an area manager and responsible for private customers business in the Baltic. Besides the work she is married and has 2 children; 10 and 17 years old.

### **5.1.2.2 Summary of the Estonian interviews**

#### **Advancement**

According to two of the Estonian respondents, E3 and E4, they are at a high level when only looking at Estonia but at a middle level when including other countries as Sweden. If they would like to advance and get a higher position, they would have to leave Estonia and move to Sweden. For them the geography can be seen as a barrier for advancement. They do not have the ability to advance if they are not ready to move, unless they do not start traveling more. So there is a self-interest-question; are they ready and interested to move or start travel more or not. Respondent E2 does not meet any barriers for advancement, though, her focus is not on advancement. Instead she focus on doing her job as good as she can and when, and if,

she sees an opportunity, she takes it. During the interview she also amplified the absence of barriers by stating:

*"If you really want something, there are no barriers."*

(Respondent E2 2015)

Since respondent E1 has a very high position today, she does not think she meets any barriers.

### **Parental leave**

When speaking about barriers women meet in their career progression all of them started to speak about maternity, even though none of them saw it as a barrier. Respondent E3 thought her two children had influenced her career, but rather positive than negative. When she got her first child she was at home from work during 3 years. Being home with her child was, then, a nice escape from a work she did not really like and which did not make her specifically happy. She got time off to think what she wanted to do and thereafter she got a new job offer in the bank which she did not know anything about, but she accepted the challenge. When she got her second child she stayed at home less than 2 years. The reason why she had a shorter maternity leave with the second child was because Swedbank offered her a new position, which she started at. Respondent E2 neither saw maternity as a barrier in her career but as a matter of concern. She felt worried about what was going to happen when she came back from maternity, if she would have the same position as earlier or not. The reason why respondent E1 never saw maternity as a barrier depended on that she never made it to a thing. She was not afraid to be the last parent picking up her child at the kindergarten. She had a busy schedule and she had to manage it. But she also expressed, when looking back at it today, it might not have been such a big deal. The only one, of the respondents, who gave an example for why maternity could be a barrier in professional development was respondent E4. She thought the legislation for maternity could prevent women's career progression and motivate them to stay at home with their children. She argued that staying home with a child from work, prevent you from being as good as you were at work before and you cannot start from the position you left.

### **Opportunities**

The women were a little bit discordant according to women's preconditions and opportunities. Respondent E4 spoke for example about Swedbank as a modern organization where she never had felt that she has had a disadvantage as a woman. But on the other hand she said women's and men's opportunities and possibilities were unequal, in favor of men. By looking at gender

equality when recruiting a new person, there are no difference but if the recruiters avoid looking at gender equality the recruiters prefer men. Even respondent E3 was on the same line. She thought men had it easier to get up in the organizations and it had been times when she had been thinking:

*“That was an interesting choice, why him?”*

(Respondent E3 2015)

She thought it depended on peoples’ higher trust limit for men and that it is a psychological matter. She describes people's way of thinking by stating:

*“If we recruit a man, he must have some kind of leadership qualities.”*

(Respondent E3 2015)

Respondent E2 was the only one that did not speak in favor of the women. She thought gender inequality can be good sometimes. She asked herself what would happen if both women and men wanted to do career and get high positions, who would take care of the children? But she was accurate by mention that it does not necessary has to be the woman being home with the child, it could just as well be the man. What she also argued for was a person’s background, experience and knowledge. She thought a woman’s opportunities and preconditions did not differ from men’s; it rather depends on the particular situation and what the person has in its bag. Following the guideline 60/40 is not good, according to her. It does not speak for the same possibilities. If a man is more suitable for a position, then he should be offered the job and vice versa. She emphasized, if we compare with the Muslims, the situation nowadays are good when thinking about gender equality. However, according to respondent E3, it is important to think about and take decisions based on gender. She thought the environment and the unit had a better balance if it was mixed with both women and men. A team that consists of people from different nations, sex, and education results in a better team environment.

Swedbank as an organization seems to take care of all the employees’ competences and support them with education and personal development, without focus on a specific gender. All of the respondents knew about the policy and agreed that Swedbank worked with it by different activity plans as a part in the everyday work. According to the Estonian women, they thought a majority of all female managers worked as office managers while the top of the

organization was dominated by men. They also experience there were more female managers working with private customers and more male managers working with corporate customers.

### **Characteristics of managers**

The commonly held skills a good leader should have, according to the Estonian women, was having the ability to work with and understand people, being dedicated and excited to inspire and motivate others. None of the women distinguished between female leadership skills and male leadership skills. They thought different people performed different leadership skills since they have different personalities. Respondent E3 stated in the interview:

*"A leader is a leader, it does not matter if it is a woman or a man."*

(Respondent E3 2015)

According to respondent E1 there is not only one leadership style that works; there are many. One important thing to know, according to her, is that it does not matter how good you are, you always need to work hard to succeed. She also thought female managers need to work harder to success; they really need to stand out. It may be related to the characteristics of a woman. She thinks women are programmed to be more emotional attached. They are expected to care about the people around them, like a mother, and are seen as more people oriented than result oriented person. Already as kids, they are raised to take care of the dolls.

Speaking about leadership also include the term power. Respondent E1 thought it did not make sense if it is a man or a woman who exercise power at the work place; it depends on how different people use power. However, respondent E3 and E4 thought it was a difference between women and men exercising power. Since women are expected to behave nicely, polite and as a team player, they are sometimes perceived as a bitch when they use power. When a man tell the individuals what to do it is more in his nature.

## 5.2 Summary of the interviews

Table 3 – Summary of the interviews

	Swedish respondents	Estonian respondents
Advancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not actively thinking on their future career</li> <li>- Personal development is important</li> <li>- Fun, interesting and stimulating work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To advance they need to move or start travel more</li> <li>- Geography as a barrier for advancement</li> <li>- Self-interest-question</li> </ul>
Parental leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Opportunity to change work position</li> <li>- Afraid that the bank would be disappointed because of pregnancy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Impact on career rather positive than negative</li> <li>- Time off to think</li> <li>- New work position</li> <li>- Matter of concern</li> <li>- It can prevent women's career progression</li> </ul>
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Different opportunities between women and men</li> <li>- Personal development support from the bank</li> <li>- Female managers at offices and male managers at top positions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unequal opportunities for women and men</li> <li>- Personal development support from the bank</li> <li>- Female managers at offices and male managers at top positions</li> </ul>

	Swedish respondents	Estonian respondents
Characteristics of managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The ability to listen and understand</li> <li>- Leadership and exercising of power are more related to personality rather than gender</li> <li>- Women are better listeners and can read people better than men</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The ability to work with and understand people, being dedicated and excited</li> <li>- Leadership and exercising of power is more related to personality rather than gender</li> <li>- Many leadership styles</li> </ul>

Source: Own compilation

## 6. Analysis

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*In this chapter the readers are provided the analysis of the empirical data. Initially the development of gender equality in the both countries is analyzed as well as the impact of parental leave on the gender Equality. Henceforth, the women's views on advancement and the opportunities women have are analyzed. Finally, the chapter ends with an analysis of the characteristics leaders and women are considered to have.*

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### 6.1 Development of gender equality

By looking at the two countries, Sweden and Estonia, there seems to be similarities, but also inequalities. The equalities originally come from the countries histories. In Sweden, questions about women's rights became important already during the latter half of the 19th- and the beginning of 20th century (Manns & Kyle n.d.). Estonia however, had a different history since they became a part of the Soviet Union in 1940 (Estonian Embassy in Stockholm n.d.). This may have had an impact on the development of gender equality in Estonia since they started to work with gender equality at different times. Estonia started to work with gender equality later than Sweden, which gave Sweden a head start. In the countries current gender situations, according to Global Gender Gap Report 2014 (Hausmann et al. 2014), Sweden is in the fourth place and Estonia in the 62th place of 142 countries worldwide. Based on the report, Sweden is in the forefront compared with Estonia.

### 6.2 Advancement

Interviewing the women from the two countries about their thoughts about female managers' career opportunities gave interesting inputs for the study. Speaking about advancement in their careers, the Swedish women seem to be quite uninterested in taking one step further in the organization. They saw personal development and the ability to have a fun job as more important. Respondent S2 did for example not feel any need for advancement since she already had an interesting and stimulating work that widen her competences. For her it seems to be more important to advance horizontal rather than vertical and maybe it is a general opinion related to gender; that women advance horizontally and men vertically. One reason to why the Swedish women appeared to be uninterested in advancement could be the meaning of



the word advancement. It may be a word they relate to as a masculine word since men historically, but also in the present time, are the ones in the society building careers, reaching new goals and getting more advanced positions. The Estonian women were not uninterested in advancement, they rather felt they did not have the ability to advance without moving or start traveling more. For them, the geography was seen as a barrier and advancement was related to a self-interest-question. The reason why the Swedish women did not meet any barriers for advancement may depend on their possibility to advance and their lack of interest. They know they have the ability to advance but since they lack the interest, they have not thought of the idea, which have resulted in that they have not met any barriers. The Estonian women, in contrast, have thought of the idea to advance and have therefore met barriers. By not searching for advancement, it will not lead to any barriers and vice versa. Furthermore, the fact that all of the Estonian women have children could be a reason for seeing geography as a barrier. Without having a child or a partner, it could have been a chance they had searched for new positions. It is consistent with the inflexibility that follows by having children and supports Eagly and Wood (1999); that a woman can be limited because of her need to take care of a child.

Something that cannot be seen as a barrier for women, but as an advantage for men is that they seem to have easier to advance. According to respondent E3, it is easier for men to advance and sometimes she have thought that the recruiters had made interesting choices by giving a certain position to a man, when there had been a woman which had suited the position better. This supports respondent E1's argument that female managers need to work harder and really need to stand out to success. Even respondent S1 was of the perception that men were encouraged to advance in a bigger extent than women in the HR industry. She was also of the view that this was a phenomenon that occurred in other women-dominated branches. This supports the Glass Escalator Theory about the escalator which pushes men up in organization while the women take the ladder (Williams 1992). One possible reason for men's easy way to advancement may be because they already are in quite high positions which make them more attractive for top management positions. Both the Estonian and Swedish women thought that most of the female managers were office managers while the male managers were top managers. The reason for this distribution can be consistent with Eagly and Karau (2002) which believe middle management require skills that women are considered more engaged in than men, and that more senior leadership roles require a more masculine behavior. According to Kanter's (1977) structural perspective, gender differences

comes from different preconditions and depends on the structure of the work in an organization. By working at different positions at different levels in an organization the genders opportunities may be affected. As the women said; there are more female managers who work as office managers (middle managers) and more male managers who work as senior managers (top managers) and it will, according to Kanter, lead to different opportunities. Since Kanter thought it was the work that produced the individuals, she thought it was the organization that needed to be changed, not the individuals. For Swedbank it therefore seems to be important to change the structure of the work to eliminate gender differences; by getting more male office managers and more female senior managers.

Our observation of the empirical data is that The Glass Ceiling Theory (The Economist 2009), about invisible barriers female managers meet in their careers, is not as supported as the Glass Escalator Theory discussed by, among others, Williams (1992) . The women may meet some resistance in their career progression but not very evident barriers, as the Glass Ceiling Theory suggests. One reason why they are not consistent with the theory may depend on the theory's emergence. It emerged 1984 and since then it has happened a lot with the development of gender equality both in Sweden and in Estonia. It is for example more common, today than before, to have a female manager and in general most of the women are working today and do not only have the role as a homemaker.

The third glass theory, the Glass Cliff (Ryan & Haslam 2005), was supported by respondent S1 when she mentioned her, earlier new position in the company as a risk manager. She got the position as manager after two earlier managers which had both not managed it. It is consistent with the Glass Cliff Theory since it means women get top positions in organizations that are in a very bad situation; that is impossible to manage. In this case the entire organization was not in a bad situation, but the department was.

### **6.3 Parental leave**

One significant difference, according to gender differences between the countries, is the parental leave. As early as 1995, one month of the parental leave was reserved for each parent in Sweden (Sternar & Molander 2011, p 32). In Estonia, on the other hand, fathers were entitled to be at home first in 1991 and today there is still no reserved month for any of the parents (Karu 2011, p.14). Though, an interesting legislation is that Estonian parents have the opportunity to stay at home with the child during 3 years (ibid). Compared with Sweden it is

approximately twice as much. In the current situation, parents in Sweden are entitled 480 days (approximately 1.5 years) (Försäkringskassan n.d.). The Estonian legislation with 3 year maternity leave may encourage women to stay at home with their children. As woman E4 states, being home with a child can prevent a woman's career opportunities and career development. One example is the negative effects on the learning capacity. Being away from work keeps the woman away from routines and education which may have a negative effect on her learning capacity and contribute to a long start-up period when she returns from maternity leave. A woman with a small child can also be seen as less attractive on the labor market since she is less flexible. According to statistics, 75 percent of the Swedish women used parental leave while the Swedish men used 25 percent (Statistics Sweden 2014b, p 5). In Estonia the numbers differed; 96 per cent of Estonian women and 7 per cent of the Estonian men took parental leave (the Population and Social Statistics Department of Statistics Estonia 2011, p. 75). It is therefore proved that women are the ones, in the largest extent, staying at home with the children and men have the role to raise money for the household. It is consistent with Eagly and Woods (2012) argument that women historically had the role as homemakers and men the role as breadwinners. The reason why Estonia's parental leave situation is more unequal may depend on Estonia's history.

Since the women are the ones being at home, the consequences from parental leave therefore may have a greater impact on women than on men. While woman are staying at home, men get an advantage by having it easier to build career since they do not have to make any breaks from work. This also affects the gender pay gap since the men's wage development never gets slower. The ones who are working, the men, also earn more money since the women not get full paid during maternity. This can end up in a vicious spiral downwards. When the first child is born, the woman often chooses to stay at home because she normally has a lower wage. After the maternity, the woman probably has an even lower wage than the man and therefore she will be the one staying at home with the next child too. Together with the statistics, about the skewed parental leave distribution (Statistics Sweden 2014b, p 5; the Population and Social Statistics Department of Statistics Estonia 2011, p. 75), we consider it can be a reason for why Estonia in 2010 was the country with the highest relative difference in the average gross hourly earnings between women and men. Even if there seem to be some negative consequences from maternity, it may be necessary for a woman staying at home to rest and recover after the delivery. Another positive aspect with maternity and/or pregnancy

seems to be that the woman gets time off to think about what she really wants to do and what is making her motivated. She gets a chance to break the patterns.

When speaking about which impact the maternity has had on their career, all of the interviewed, except respondent S3 since she does not have any own children, agreed that it had impacted their career; but mostly in a positive manner. E3 saw maternity leave as a nice escape from work and time off to think about what she wanted. Moreover, both E3 and S1 took the opportunity to change position in the company simultaneously when they got back from maternity leave. However, respondent S4 and E2 had worse memories related to maternity. Respondent S4 was very afraid that the bank would be disappointed at her because of the pregnancy, since she just had got a managing position, and E2 felt worried about how it was going to be when she would go back to work. These matter of concerns, was however unnecessary. Both the respondents, S4 and E2, stated that they were happy with the way the bank had supported them.

By studying how the women discussed their maternity time, one will most likely say that their time off from work affected their working situation in some way. Even though some of the women used that circumstance to change direction on their profession they still had to adapt to the situation in a different way than a man would have needed to do. This supports the limitation-part of the Social Role Theory where Eagly & Wood (1999) argues that women can be limited since they, because of the gender roles, have to take care of the children. Respondent S1's discussion, about differences in what opportunities a man and a woman has, and that this differences are due to women having the main responsibility for the household, also supports the Social Role Theory. It also includes that woman facing some limitations because they are woman and expected to have certain responsibilities.

## **6.4 Opportunities**

Swedbank as an organization is, according to the interviewed women, a modern organization which supports their employees and, overall, no woman experienced any difference in how their employer gave them the opportunity to develop their personal skills compared to their male colleagues. It is consistent with the company's gender and diversity policy. But even if the women thought Swedbank was a gender neutral bank, the women spoke about women's different opportunities compared with men's and how they had reflected over being women. Respondent S1 said she had reflected over being a woman when she was younger while

respondent S4 had been cautious to not get any disadvantages just because she is a woman. She has for example thought about how she expresses herself. Why respondent S1 does not reflect over being a woman nowadays may depend on her high position in the organization. She has, during her time in the bank, demonstrated what she is capable of. Respondent S3 does also think there are a lot of unequal situations that we are not aware of because of old habits that no one reflects over. It is first when people are aware of a problem, they can solve them. By avoiding putting the gender glasses on, people will turn a blind eye to inequality and it inhibits the development of gender equality. Another woman that never had felt she has had a disadvantage by being a woman was E4. Though, something she had thought about was that opportunities and possibilities in general were unequal in favor of men. E1 was also on the same track as she argued that to success as a female manager, you have to work harder than a male manager. The reason for this is unclear. Maybe it is related to the society's prejudices toward female managers and the existing masculine leader stereotype. To eliminate gender differences, the perceptions of female management in the society need to be changed, which is consistent with Due Billing (2002).

## **6.5 Characteristics of managers**

At first, the women in the two countries stated there are no differences in leadership between the genders. Instead they meant the differences in leadership styles are due to different personalities. They have met male leaders who were very responsive and attentive to their employees, and women who were very goal-oriented and results-focused. This, linked to the way women think a good leader should be, is against the Role Congruity Theory where Eagly and Karau (2002) argue that men in general are considered to fit better into the picture as a leader. Instead the women in this study meant that there is no difference in how women and men are as leaders. However, respondent S1 adapts her language and way of acting to be less feminine in her role as a leader. The reason for her behavior can be to suit the leader role better by speaking the men's language, both unspoken (body language) and spoken language. This could prove Eagly and Karau's (2002) statement about the Role Congruity Theory since this adaptation suggests that respondent S1 thinks that a less feminine and more masculine appearance suits the leadership role better. Respondent E1 perceives that female managers must work harder than men to succeed. This, she said, is because there is an image that women are more human-oriented and that they have been taught since childhood to be more emotional and caring. Again this proves the Role Congruity Theory which says the general

picture of leadership is not considered to fit female characteristics and therefore would contribute to women having to fight harder to prove to be suitable as a leader (Williams 2012).

Something more that was related to individuals rather than gender was power exercising. The respondents thought that different people have different personalities and that they also use power in a different manner. Although, women from both countries expressed they felt that women who use a strict tone in their leadership is perceived as aggressive and, as one of the Estonian women put it; bitchy. However they experience that men who behave in the same way are considered as goal-oriented. This is consistent with the corporate climate barriers where The Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) argues that although women succeed in identifying the norm, in this case the leadership norm, they still have difficulties to use this to succeed as managers.

It is interesting to see how both the Estonian and Swedish women, at first, are very careful with not separating between the genders when discussing leadership, but after all started to describe different characteristics of the genders. When they speak about leadership styles and exercising power they argue that it depends on the individuals rather than the gender but immediately after, they start to speak about how women and men differ as leaders and when they are exercising power. The reason for that can be, when they speak about the differences between female and male managers they speak for themselves but when they are talking about characteristics they speak for the broad mass; what the prejudices and opinions are towards the genders. When they spoke about characteristics of women and men they mentioned the same characteristics as the theories. Stodtbeck and Mann (1956) stated for example that men tend to possess more task related behaviors and women more relational and social behaviors which is consistent with the women who said women are more person oriented and men more goal oriented. Their “correct” answers may depend on their knowledge about the general gender theories. By speaking about different behaviors between women and men, it can also mean that there, after all, exist differences between female and male management.

## 7. Conclusions

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*In this chapter, the reader is provided the conclusions. The chapter begins with the empirical and theoretical contributions. Furthermore, there are suggestions for future research and implications for practitioners.*

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### 7.1 Empirical and theoretical contributions

As an answer to our research question female middle managers' career opportunities are impacted by a country's history, barriers related to children and by the society's prejudices toward female managers. Since Estonia has an underlying history that differs from Sweden's, the gender situation looks different there. It is more unequal between the genders, in favor of men, and it affects Estonian female middle managers' career opportunities negatively.

Moreover, female middle managers' career opportunities in both countries are affected by maternity. However, this is not always perceived as negative by the women themselves. But despite the fact that women do not experience maternity and the maternity leave as an obstacle, it does contribute to women receiving lower wages than men. Maternity leave and the fact that women are those that are mostly at home with young or sick children also contribute to women becoming less attractive in the labor market. In this study, we see that it is the image of the woman as the one responsible for the children and the household that contribute to this. It is not the maternity leave itself that affects the career opportunities for women, but the norm that it is the woman who should be the one taking care of the children and be on parental leave.

If the woman is on maternity leave when the first child is born because of economic reasons, then the difference in pay between the man and the woman will, most likely, be even greater when the woman goes back to her work. In the case of a second child it would then be even more beneficial for the couple's economy if the man continued working while the woman goes on maternity leave. In this way, a vicious spiral that affects women negatively is created. Sweden seems to have come further in changing the image of the woman as sole head of the home compared to the development in Estonia. It is still highly unusual that the men in Estonia use any part of the parental leave.

Another aspect that has an impact on female middle managers' career opportunities is the society's prejudices toward female managers. As the Role Congruity Theory claims, there seems to exist a masculine leader stereotype which has characteristics as goal and result oriented while a woman's characteristics are more emotional and people oriented (Williams 2012). The different characteristics between the sexes can have an impact on the women's career opportunities, but if it is negative or positive depends on what is requested. We could not see that there would be any differences between prejudices about female managers in Sweden and Estonia. However, it is not possible to draw such generalized conclusions as this study only examined four women in each country.

Based on our analysis, we cannot see that the women experienced that there is a glass ceiling with barriers that prevent them in their careers. However, the women were aware of the term and did not oppose its existence. Thus we cannot reject the theory completely, but note that it is not applicable to our respondents.

Two striking differences we see between the two countries are firstly that Estonia has a much longer maternity leave than Sweden. Secondly, the parental leave in Estonia is almost only used by women due to the image of the woman as the person responsible for the home and the children is still very strong there. By this we can see that Eagly and Woods' (1999) argument about woman being limited because of their need to take care of children is more applicable to Estonian women than Swedish.

## **7.2 Suggestions for future research**

This thesis has studied what affects female middle managers' career opportunities in Sweden compared with Estonia. Female middle- and top managers have been interviewed and examined. The result of the study was in short that female middle managers' career opportunities are affected by the country of origin's history, parental leave and prejudices in the society toward female managers. According to maternity, the respondents argue that it has impacted their career but rather in a positive manner than a negative. For further research it would be interesting to make an in-depth study about the relation between female middle managers' careers and maternity; if it can be seen as a barrier or an advantage. In this study all the respondents, except one, had own children and in further maternity research it would be interesting to interview female managers without children and compare them to women with



children. The result of this type of study would examine if maternity is an advantage or disadvantage for a woman's career.

This study is conducted from the perspective of female managers but for future research it would be interesting to interview male managers and examine which opinions they have according to female managers and their career opportunities. An interesting study made by Women Business Research Institute (n.d.b) showed that half of all female managers believe there are barriers to do career while 70 percent of all male managers believes there is no barriers for female managers (Women's Business Research Institute n.d.b). This indicates that there could be an interesting analysis when comparing the views on this matter. The reason why women speak about barriers may depend on that it is them who face the problem. To eliminate gender inequality at work places and in the society it is important to inform even the male managers about the female managers' barriers. Without putting the gender glasses on everyone, it is hard to reach gender equality.

The reason why people want to advance may differ. In this thesis the Swedish respondents were rather uninterested in advancement. For further research it would be interesting to look more at the motivation factor; to examine what motivate different people to career progression. According to Maslow (1943) factors as social recognition, status and respect, as well as self-actualization, are considered to be driving motivating factors in a person's personal and work-related development

The famous glass ceiling often focuses, like this study, on barriers between middle management and top management. For further researchers it would be interesting to look at female managers at lower levels. Probably there is not only a glass ceiling between middle and high positions; there may also be a ceiling between low and middle positions. Since there already exist many studies about the higher glass ceiling between middle and top management, it would be interesting to compare it with the lower glass ceiling, between lower level and middle level, to see if there are other barriers that prevent the women from career progression.

The small sample size of eight women in total makes it impossible to generalize for the entire banking sector. By making an extensive quantitative study, the study could have been more general for all of the female middle managers in the banking sector and to develop a

quantitative study, we could have done surveys sent by email. This could have reached a bigger sample size.

### **7.3 Implications for practitioners**

This thesis can be of value for managers as well as people working with HR questions in the banking sector. We suggest that, in order to minimize the career barriers for female middle managers, organizations work actively with producing, developing, and work according to their gender equality policy.

To reduce the obstacles that may arise for women in connection with parental leave, we further recommend that companies are working to ease the circumstances around this for women and to show that they support a woman's decision to have a child.

## 8. References

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## 8.2 Oral sources

Respondent S1 2015, interview, 24 April

Respondent S2 2015, interview, 29 April

Respondent S3 2015, interview, 6 May

Respondent S4 2015, interview, 6 May

Respondent E1 2015, interview, 24 April

Respondent E2 2015, interview, 8 May

Respondent E3 2015, interview, 4 May

Respondent E4 2015, interview, 7 May

## 8.3 Figures

Figure 1, Own compilation, numbers collected from The Global Gender Gap Report 2014

Figure 2, Own compilation, numbers collected from The Global Gender Gap Report 2014

Figure 3, Own compilation, numbers collected from The Global Gender Gap Report 2014

Figure 4, Own compilation, numbers collected from The Global Gender Gap Report 2014

## 8.4 Tables

Table 1, Own compilation

Table 2, Own compilation

Table 3, Own compilation

## **8. Appendix**

### **8.1 Interview guide**

#### **Background**

What do you work with? What position do you have? How is a normal day at work?

How many hours per week do you work?

How long have you been working at Swedbank and what did you do before this job? How did you get where you are today?

Which education do you have?

How old are you?

How is your family situation; do you have a partner and/or children?

How did it affect your career when you got a child?

#### **Career**

How do you feel for advancement, to get a higher position at Swedbank?

What barriers do you see for an eventual advancement?

In your working life, is there any situation, or has been, when you have reflected over being a woman? If yes, when?

How do you think female managers' career opportunities differ from a male managers'?

What does Swedbank do to develop your competence? Do you think it is enough to be stimulated?

What do you know about Swedbank's gender and diversity policy? How does the company work with it?

#### **Characteristics**

Where in the organization do you find most female managers? (lower level, middle or higher level)

What kind of gender differences do you think there are at Swedbank?

How do you think good leaders should be? Which characteristics should they have?

Do you think female managers and male managers have different leadership skills? If yes, how do they differ?

What are typical female and male characteristics in general?

In which way can female characteristics be seen as an advantage or disadvantage?

What kind of prejudices do you think there is toward female managers?

How does it differ if a female manager exercises power compared with a male manager?

What do you think about female management in the future?

## **8.2 Interview questions sent to respondents before the interviews**

How long have you been working at Swedbank and what did you do before this job? How did you get where you are today?

Which education do you have?

What barriers do you see for an eventual advancement?

In your working life, is there any situation, or has been, when you have reflected over being a woman? If yes, when?

How do you think good leaders should be? Which characteristics should they have?

Do you think female managers and male managers have different leadership skills? If yes, how do they differ?

What are typical female and male characteristics in general?