

# **Troubling the Surface of (Im)possibilities**

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Preschool Teachers' Relational Power in Shaping Gender  
Equality Work in Sweden

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Preschool Teachers' Relational Power in Shaping Gender Equality Work in Sweden

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*To my children—I love you both, to infinity and beyond.*

*Till alla förskollärare, särskilt er som deltog i den här forskningen.*

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Megan Rådesjö  
Göteborg, Sverige  
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# List of Articles

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This dissertation is based on the following articles, referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

- I. Gender Inequality Problems and their (Im)possibilities: Critically Exploring Swedish Preschools' Gender Equality Mandate – *Published in Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*
- II. Not a Bunch of Politically Correct Ms. Prysseliuses: How Preschool Teachers' Gender (In)equality Knowledges are Shaped In and Through the Swedish Preschool – *Unpublished Manuscript*
- III. 'No, She Can't Be the Hulk!': Critically Exploring Opposition to Swedish Preschools' Gender Equality Work and Preschool Teachers' Responses to it – *Published in Gender and Education*
- IV. Opposing Tough Princesses and Girly-boys: How Dresses Make Doing Gender in Swedish Preschools (Im)possible – *Revised and Resubmitted to Gender and Society*

# Abstract

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On the surface, gender equality in Sweden seems exceptional. This reputation extends to Swedish preschools, which have long been hailed for progressive practices and global influence. Yet beneath this polished surface are persistent tensions. Over the past two decades, research and government investigations have repeatedly identified shortcomings in preschools' gender equality work, often attributing them to preschool teachers' insufficient knowledge or practices. In a shift toward a feminist sociological perspective, this compilation dissertation is a critical exploration into preschool teachers' relational power in shaping the (im)possibilities of gender equality work in Sweden. My specific focus is on how power relations shape (im)possibilities for this work and how preschool teachers navigate them through power dynamics in their everyday practices. Drawing on an eclectic array of critical theories, I weave together a theoretical framework used across four empirical articles to analyze different aspects of preschool teachers' relational power in shaping gender equality work, including policy, situated knowledges, public sector gendered organizations, opposition, and doing gender. Drawing on a critical feminist ethnographic approach, I carry out critical policy analysis using diffraction, two phases of semi-structured interviews, one phase of research subject interviewing, and participant observations. The empirical materials include the national preschool curriculum, various policy documents, observation field notes from 112 hours with 10 preschool teachers, photos, and transcripts from 52 interviews with 21 preschool teachers across seven preschools in Sweden. The four articles show how preschool teachers' relational power shapes the (im)possibilities of gender equality work. Article I shows how contradictions and exclusions are embedded in the problem constructs of the gender equality mandate. These often rely on binary categories of "girls" and "boys," while also attempting to destabilize them. Problem constructions exclude non-binary, intersex, and intersectional identities, including race/skin color and class. Article II demonstrates how preschool teachers' situated knowledges related to the gender equality mandate and work are (re)shaped within and through preschools as public-sector gendered organizations through professionalization, negotiation of belonging, gender order experiences, and disagreements with colleagues. These situated knowledges (re)shape (im)possibilities by constraining their legitimacy, compelling preschool teachers to learn, turning this work into either a political or an administrative practice, and prompting either conflict management solutions or individual approaches. Article III exhibits how preschool teachers experience and express opposition to gender equality. Preschool teachers, other preschool staff, children, parents, and societal actors do active and passive opposition (un)intentionally. Preschool teachers respond by accepting or ignoring opposition, or by hiding or defending gender equality work. Article IV shows how dresses shape the (im)possibilities for gendered subjectivity by focusing on how preschool teachers' practices shape whether the climate makes undoing or redoing gender possible. Together, these analyses demonstrate that preschool teachers' relational power is both constrained by and transformative from within power relations—ultimately determining that many of the (im)possibilities of this work hinge on 'doings' beyond pedagogy. The dissertation contributes empirically, methodologically, and theoretically to feminist sociology, particularly within the areas of early childhood education, gender and sexuality, work, organizations and occupations, emotions, and political sociology.

**Keywords:** Preschool, Preschool Teachers, Gender Equality, Gender Inequality, Gender Equality Work, Gender Equality Mandate, Relational Power, Opposition, Resistance, Doing Gender, Undoing Gender, Redoing Gender, Gender Subjectivity, Gendered Organization, Feminism, Anti-Feminism, Anti-Gender, Domination, Solidarity, Situated Knowledges

A wave is caused by oscillating movement beneath an ocean's otherwise smooth surface. In Europe and the United States, waves have long been a symbol of how feminist movements have emerged through struggle over time, shaped by different experiences and understandings of gender inequality. It is arguably a simplistic metaphor. Scholars in China argue that either kaleidoscope or forest metaphors describe feminist struggle in their context better (Tong & Botts, 2024). And, while of course the differences across feminist struggles are more than noteworthy, I want to take this metaphor to a different scale. To put it into Ahmed's (2017) words, "I think of feminist *action* like ripples in water, a small wave, possibly created by agitation from weather; here, there, each movement making another possible, another ripple, outward, reaching..." (p. 3). With this as my starting point, I develop this dissertation through feminist action by shifting the dominant approach to understanding gender equality work in Swedish preschools. This marks my effort to cause "agitation," or "trouble" the status quo, to stir up ripples, perhaps even waves, and to critically explore the (im)possibilities of shaping gender equality work from beneath what appears to be an otherwise smooth surface.

## The Smooth Surface – Setting the Scene

On the surface, gender equality in Sweden is exceptional. This reputation has also extended to gender equality work in Swedish preschools, which has garnered the attention of international news media and other countries seeking to emulate it. The exceptional image of the Swedish preschool's work on gender equality has a long history, dating back to before the preschool was called "förskola" and gender equality was known as "jämställdhet." In 1936, Swedish diplomat and Nobel Prize winner Alva Myrdal argued in her text *Riktiga Leksaker* [Real Toys] that parents and educators should not discourage young children from playing with a variety of toys and activities. Boys *and* girls, she argued, should be able to role-play in a pretend kitchen, clean, play with blocks, and cars. *Barnstugentredningen* [Commission on Nursery Provision], which was carried out between 1968 and 1975, similarly outlined that preschools play a crucial role in helping children overcome gendered barriers that impact their future opportunities (SOU 1972: 27, p. 17-18). Three decades later, in 1998, the first National Curriculum for Swedish Preschools formally established a gender equality mandate requiring gender equality work, or the efforts to eliminate problems associated with gender inequalities.

The gender equality mandate has led to breakthroughs in pedagogical approaches to gender equality work in preschools. The books written by preschool teachers Svaleryd

(2002), *Genuspedagogik* [Gender Pedagogy], and Wahlström (2003), *Flickor, Pojkar Och Pedagoger: Jämställdhetspedagogik i Praktiken* [Girls, boys and educators: Gender equality pedagogy in practice], have had a meaningful impact around the country. These empirically based handbooks problematize children's gendered experiences in preschool and aim to inspire preschool pedagogues' critical reflection on their efforts. Björntomten and Tittmyran, now Trödje Preschool, adopted these pedagogies early on and were already recognized as Sweden's first gender equal daycare in 1996. Children who attended these preschools reported feeling more aware of gender norms, marked a noticeable difference in boys' language development, and identified girls as having greater self-awareness and taking up much more space in the classroom (Svenska Dagbladet, 2007). These benefits align with research showing similar results (Shutts et al., 2017). The Egalia and Nicolaigården Preschools alone have been internationally recognized in, for instance, The New York Times (Rasicot, 2012), CNN (Scott, 2017), and BBC (Hebblethwaite, 2011) for their pedagogical approaches, such as using the gender-neutral pronoun "hen" and ensuring all children engage in a diverse range of activities.

Preschool teachers are also seen as leaders in promoting gender equality work. Lenz Taguchi, Bodén, and Ohrlander (2011) note that gender equality work has even led preschool pedagogues to become researchers in this field (cf. Dolk, 2013; Eidevald, 2011; Hellman, 2010). Today, preschool pedagogues continue to develop various pedagogies for gender equality work (Wedin, 2021), and some even take additional educational courses to become gender pedagogues or earn LGBTQI+ certification. These preschool pedagogues are on the frontlines of this work, lecturing and writing about it, which has a profound influence on gender equality work beyond the preschool (Arvidson, 2014; Lenz Taguchi, Bodén, & Ohrlander, 2011). Here, on the surface, it is difficult to identify any challenges, complexities, or problems related to gender equality work in Swedish preschools—all I can show you here is Swedish exceptionalism.

## Troubling the Surface – Delineating the Research Problems

There are troubles beneath the surface. Since the introduction of the gender equality mandate in 1998, which requires gender equality work, previous research has consistently shown a wide array of problems. Generally, these problems are that the gender equality mandate is often misinterpreted, that pedagogues do not use a gender equality perspective, and consequently, that they facilitate the reproduction of gender inequalities in Swedish preschools (Brunila & Edström, 2013; Dolk, 2013; Edström & Brunila, 2016; Edström, 2010; Edström, 2014; Eidevald, 2009; Emilson & Johansson, 2013; Emilson et al., 2016; Frödén, 2019; Gillberg, 2009; Heikkilä, 2020; Heikkilä, 2023; Hellman, 2010; Markström & Simonsson, 2011; Lind-Valdan, 2014; Månsson, 2000; Odenbring, 2010; SOU 2004: 115; Rantala & Heikkilä, 2020; SOU 2006: 75; Swedish School Inspectorate, 2017; Tallberg Broman, 2002; Tallberg Broman, 2018; Wernersson, 2009a; Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2010; Ärlemalm-Hagsér & Samuelsson, 2009). My research problems in this dissertation build

on these previously identified troubles *and* further trouble them, energizing my movement beneath the smooth surface throughout my dissertation.

The troubles with gender equality work in Swedish preschools identified by previous research have prompted numerous government investigations across more than two decades. The Gender Equality Delegation for Preschools carried out an official government investigation for the Ministry of Education and was tasked with highlighting, strengthening, and developing gender equality work in preschools. This resulted in *Den könade förskolan – om betydelsen av jämställdhet och genus i förskolans pedagogiska arbete* [The Gendered Preschool – On the meaning of gender equality and gender in preschools' pedagogical work] (SOU 2004: 115) and *Jämställd förskola - om betydelsen av jämställdhet och genus i förskolans pedagogiska arbete* [Gender Equal Preschool – On the meaning of gender equality and gender in preschools' pedagogical work] (SOU 2006:75), both of which align with the previous research. A decade later, the government tasked the Swedish School Inspectorate (2017) with reviewing the quality of education and educational activities in preschools, including gender equality work. Their report also noted the shortcomings of gender equality work in preschool. Following changes in the gender equality mandate, Heikkilä (2023) wrote *Forskningsöversikt över fältet svensk förskola, genus och jämställdhet 2002–2022: Från bemötande och sociala relationer till undervisning och breddade perspektiv* [Research Overview Of The Field Swedish Preschool, Gender And Gender Equality 2002–2022: From treatment and social relations to teaching and broadened perspectives existing literature] for the Swedish Gender Equality Agency. This report indicates that, even now, very little has changed in gender equality work.

The literature has truly amassed into a sprawling and rich scholarly project. It has illuminated insights pointing to shortcomings in gender equality work, primarily located in the difficulties preschool pedagogues face in doing pedagogical gender equality work at the organizational level, and more recently, how challenging this is to manage. While I recognize the value of this research and do not wish to diminish the significance of these results, I believe it is crucial to critically examine many of the assumptions and results within this literature. In doing this, I do not argue that the problems highlighted by previous research are *not* problems. On the contrary, I am not, for instance, surprised that gender inequalities are (re)produced in preschools. However, like Axelsson and Frödén (2021), Vallberg Roth and Tallberg Broman (2018), Tallberg Broman (2018), and Heikkilä (2023), I find it problematic that, with few exceptions, previous research primarily highlights the problems and limitations of preschools' gender equality work. This, to me, seems to be an antagonistic focus that renders efforts and accomplishments in doing gender equality work invisible, making it difficult for the various actors engaging with this research to know what can empirically inform and improve their gender equality work in practice.

I also find it problematic that much of the previous research recurrently locates the problems with gender equality work in its poor management from above and in preschool pedagogues' failure, at the individual and organizational levels, to carry it out pedagogically (Edström, 2010; Axelsson & Frödén, 2021). This focus on problems with pedagogy has

resulted in several books (cf. Eidevald, 2011; Svaleryd, 2002; Lenz Taguchi, Bodén, Ohrlander, 2011; Wedin, 2021), articles (cf. Bayne, 2009; Dolk, 2009; Edström, 2010), and dissertations (cf. Dolk, 2013; Eidevald, 2009; Hellman, 2010; Odenbring, 2010). Axelsson and Frödén (2021) call this focus a pedagogization of gender equality work. As Tallberg Broman (2002) puts it, “[Gender equality] has been transformed from an ideological question connected to power and resource division to a pedagogical question, where every preschool teacher and every pedagogue is responsible” (p. 166). This focus on the pedagogical aspects of gender equality work fundamentally decontextualizes the preschool from the deep structural order in Sweden and the preschools’ role within it.

Related to both the largely dejecting picture focused on the shortcomings of gender equality work and the attention to challenges in carrying out and managing pedagogy, I also problematize the recurrent tendency in some of the previous research and government investigations, to either reduce preschool pedagogues to objects (What should we do with them? How should they be managed? They do x, and it means y.) or to build on the assumption that preschool pedagogues are apolitical actors who, given the proper circumstances, would carry out gender equality work without question as if it were a self-evident, straightforward goal. For instance, across government investigations and some research, it is common to attribute the shortcomings of gender equality work to preschool pedagogues’ lack of knowledge, time, or organizational or managerial support—or to note these attributions (cf. Gillberg, 2009; Heikkilä, 2023, p. 26; Eidevald, 2009, p. 8; SOU 2006:75; Swedish School Inspectorate, 2017; Warin & Adrian, 2017, p. 378; Lind-Valdan, 2014). From these perspectives, preschool pedagogues are not seen as agentic political subjects in their own right, suggesting a clear division between professional knowledge and personal ideology. This needs to be troubled.

In this dissertation, these problematizations of the previous literature serve as a springboard for critically exploring other explanations, drawing on an eclectic array of critical theories related to policy, gender, intersectionality, occupations, pedagogy, relational power, and opposition. For this reason, I am not trying to simply fill gaps in the research per se, I am suggesting a shift in perspective and a change in scope in research on gender equality work in preschools. In doing so, I contest the positioning of preschool pedagogues’ challenges in interpreting the gender equality mandate, and the shortcomings of pedagogically implementing gender equality work, as *the* reasons why gender inequality is (re)produced in preschools. Instead, I see Swedish exceptionalism (Alm et al., 2021; de los Reyes et al, 2002; de los Reyes, 2016; Shierup & Åhlund, 2011; Habel, 2012) as part of the analytical background, or better yet, the foreground, *the surface*, that stimulates my problematization of the construction of Swedish gender equality as an exemplar that all Swedes, people living in Sweden, and the world should follow. This surface, as I will argue, makes a range of socio-political struggles invisible, including those that lead to the reproduction of gender inequalities in and through the preschools.

One of my primary assumptions in this research is that gender inequalities shape and are reshaped through power relations. This is done through deep structural orders of

Swedish society, which situate the preschool, preschool pedagogues, and the gender equality work they are responsible for doing (Allen, 1999; Haraway, 1988). My focus is consequently on power. I see power as relational and diffused through deep structural orders, or what I sometimes refer to as deep structural conditions, which describe the complex background perspective of power relations that structure our social situations (Allen, 1999). For instance, the power relation of a gender order structures gender subjectification. I see power dynamics as more localized, everyday lived and embodied practices that can be carried out through discursive practice and/or material shifts to (re)shape power relations (Ahmed, 2004; Allen, 1999; Arendt, 1970; Butler, 1997; Butler, 2004; Foucault, 1980; Gramsci, 1971). This relational framing of power is crucial for understanding how structural and everyday forces shape and are shaped. From this perspective, I see preschool pedagogues as agentic political subjects who engage in power dynamics that shape the (im)possibilities of gender (in)equality (work), constrained by power relations embedded in deep structures.

## Moving Deeper with the Trouble – Research Aims and Questions

Broadly, I aim to critically explore preschool teachers' relational power in shaping the (im)possibilities of gender equality work in Sweden. Until now, I have only referred to preschool pedagogues, a concept encompassing preschool teachers and childminders who both do pedagogical work with children in preschools. In this dissertation, however, I center preschool teachers, who are university-educated and certified. This is because they are, according to the policy and curriculum that govern the preschool, intended to lead this work, professionally responsible for spearheading the collective interpretation of the gender equality mandate, and planning and documenting gender equality work (Lpfö, 2025). I have chosen to focus solely on preschool teachers' gender equality work because their role itself has a long history rooted in gender (in)equality, a topic that grounds this dissertation. I have conducted this qualitative research using a critical feminist ethnographic approach, as it facilitates a critical exploration through queer gendered understandings rooted in social engagements (Valocchi, 2005), which give way to descriptive accounts *and*, more critically, their conditions of possibility (Butler, 1990, p. xxii). Informed by an eclectic selection of critical theories, I draw on empirical materials, including the national Swedish preschool curriculum, policy documents, participant observation field notes, photos, planning/documentation documents, and transcripts from three phases of interviews with 21 preschool teachers from seven preschools across Sweden. My specific objective is to critically explore how power relations shape the (im)possibilities of gender equality work in Swedish preschools, and how preschool teachers navigate the power dynamics related to gender equality work in their everyday practices. I have formed these overarching questions to guide me throughout this research:

- I. In what ways do power relations enable, constrain, or (re)shape (im)possibilities for preschool teachers' gender equality work in Swedish preschools?
- II. How do preschool teachers negotiate, resist, oppose, or (re)produce (im)possibilities through power dynamics in their everyday gender equality work?
- III. When is gender equality work (im)possible, and why?

These are big, comprehensive questions because this is a compilation dissertation, meaning I address the overarching aims and questions across four research articles, each with more specific aims and research questions. I refer to the articles in this kappa as I, II, III, and IV.

## Structure of the Kappa

This is a kappa, or a comprehensive summary of my compilation dissertation, organized into seven chapters. In Chapter One, I have introduced the study's research problem, objectives, and significance. I have also briefly mentioned the theoretical framework, methodology, and structure. Detailed contextualization is necessary to describe the power relations shaping preschool teachers' work through the deep structural order. For this reason, in Chapters Two and Three, I combine background and previous literature to argue that preschools' gender equality work is not just a localized struggle about preschool teachers' knowledge or pedagogical choices, but part of broader political and ideological debates, struggles, and politics that have been engaged with over time through everyday practices. Specifically, in Chapter Two, I provide the sociological grounding for my dissertation by situating gender (in)equalities within Sweden's deep structural order. In Chapter Three, I locate the empirical sociological focus of my dissertation, preschool teachers' work within the preschool as an arena for gender equality in Sweden. I do not see Chapters Two and Three as separate from each other. On the contrary, these chapters are very much entangled. However, a frequent pattern I have noticed is that the history and background of the Swedish preschool are often excluded from (hi)stories about gender equality in Sweden. To make this historical and political context visible and dig deeper, Chapter Three stands alone. In Chapter Four, I synthesize my arguments on what theory is and does across the compilation. I achieve this by demonstrating how theory serves as a lens that orients me, guiding my analyses of empirical research materials, and by showing how I have critiqued, refined, and extended theory. Additionally, I illustrate how I have reinterpreted theory, and how some of the theories I use border on method. In Chapter Five, I motivate and describe the methodology deployed across the compilation. In Chapter Six, I summarize the four articles that comprise this dissertation. In Chapter Seven, the final chapter, I synthesize all the results, putting them into dialogue with theory and previous literature. Then, I outline the theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions of this dissertation to feminist sociology of education, gender, work, and politics. I conclude with recommendations for ways forward in practice and research.

In this chapter, I provide the sociological grounding for my dissertation by situating gender (in)equalities within Sweden's deep structural order. I do this by tracing how gender (in)equalities have been constructed within entanglements of historical, economic, political, cultural, ideological, and societal contexts. Through this account, I construct a collage over a range of political ideological debates, circumstances, struggles, and politics. For instance, I show how the field of possibilities for gender (in)equalities in Sweden has been shaped over time by a complex web of structural facets, including patriarchy, racism, ethnocentrism, neocolonialism, imperialism, classism, capitalism, and neoliberalism. This chapter provides context for, motivates, and informs my first research question: In what ways do power relations enable, constrain, or shape (im)possibilities for preschool teachers' gender equality work in Swedish preschools? The stories in the chapter establish the broader historical and ongoing societal negotiation over gender equality. In the remainder of the chapter, I first examine the shift from women's rights to gender equality (*jämställdhet*) and give a feminist retelling of key moments and struggles that made this shift possible. I then examine how activists transformed gender equality into a political and policy issue, and how these developments have evolved over time. Next, I show how gender equality has become central to Sweden's nation branding and exceptionalist self-image. Finally, I problematize this imaginary by highlighting gaps between policy and lived experience, and by pointing to growing tensions in contemporary debates. These tensions form the circumstantial background for Chapter Three, where I show how preschools are a societal arena for gender equality (work) in Sweden.

### From Women's Rights and Equality to *Jämställdhet*

The story of Swedish gender equality sometimes begins before Sweden (cf. SVT, 2023–2024; The Viking Museum, 2025; Ingelman-Sundberg, 2004). For instance, as early as the Viking period, women's rights and equality have been recorded in Scandinavia. Written records show that Viking women were more independent and had more rights than women elsewhere during the same period. Women could demand a divorce due to recurrent domestic violence or own their own business (National Museum of Denmark, 2025). Buckwalter and Baten (2019) find that enamel hypoplasia and height ratios between men and women during the Viking and medieval periods indicate that Scandinavian women in the rural periphery had good health and nutritional equality relative to men and other women in Europe. However, starting the story here suggests that gender equality is innate to Swedish people, which is misleading. There is ample evidence indicating that, more broadly, women were considered inferior to men in Viking society; for instance, they were not permitted to appear in court or receive a share

of a man's inheritance (National Museum of Denmark, 2025). To understand how power relations are enabled, constrained, or shaped within Sweden, and to establish the sociological foundation of my dissertation, my intention in this section is to demonstrate that gender equality is not an inherent characteristic of the people and societies in this region. This will make the struggle for gender equality in Sweden visible.

The stories about the power struggles between men and women are often set much later, in the 1600s and 1700s, when protofeminists in Sweden mounted early attacks on the subordination of women and asserted women's rights. This was frequently done anonymously by publishing essays and poems in different public periodicals. Notable works include Margareta Momma's (1738) *Samtal emellan Argi skugga och en obekant Fruentimbers skugga nyligen ankommen til de dödas Rjke* [Conversation between the Shadow of Argus and the unfamiliar Shadow of a Female recently arrived at the Kingdom of the Dead] and Hedvig Charlotta Nordenflycht's *Fruentimbers Plikt at upöfwa deras wett* [The Duty of Women to Use their Wit] (1741) and *Fruentimrens försvar* [Defense of Women] (1761). Many of these works chronicle power asymmetries between men and women's influence and frame women's rights as human rights, including the right to education. Öhrberg (2001), for instance, argues that Momma seeks to redefine women through political rhetoric.

During the mid-nineteenth century, Sweden was a poor country with a predominantly agricultural economy and a small middle class. Nearly the entire population of 3.5 million people lived in the countryside (Nermo, 1999). The view of women was rooted in patriarchy, as illustrated in this text from 1815: "Women are not officially individual people of the state; she is not raised for participation in the state, but for men" (cited in Tallberg Broman, 2002, p. 9). Under these conditions, the novel *Hertha* was written by Fredrika Bremer in 1856 (Forsås-Scott, 1997). *Hertha* chronicled real Swedish court cases to highlight the subordinate legal status of unmarried women under the 1734 Civil Code, which mandated that they remain permanently under the guardianship of male relatives until marriage, after which their husbands would assume control—or, should I say, ownership. This initiative sparked the Hertha Discussion, which reached the Swedish Parliament and led to legislation granting women legal independence at age 25 (Forsås-Scott, 1997). This is important to note, as it illustrates how the struggle for gender equality gave rise to societal discourse and political changes in women's rights, which I see as framing my dissertation sociologically.

Beyond this, *Hertha*'s impact was extraordinary, catalyzing the establishment of the *Kungliga Högre Lärarinneseminariet* [Royal Advanced Female Teachers' Seminary] in 1861, the first public institution of higher academic education made open to women in Sweden. *Hertha* even made way for social organization around women's rights and equality (Forsås-Scott, 1997). In 1859, *Tidskrift för Hemmet* [The Home Review], a women's rights magazine in Sweden, was founded by Sophie Adlersparre and Rosalie Olivecrona, often considered the official starting point of the women's rights movement. Following this, in 1884, the Fredrika Bremer Association was established as the first women's rights organization in Sweden. As a result, Fredrika Bremer's radical examination of women's conditions is often

framed as a major source of inspiration for first-wave feminism in Sweden (Forås-Scott, 1997), and essential to establishing the organization of women's movement for gender equality in the societal and political spheres.

Noticing the shift toward emancipatory thinking, Ellen Key published *Om reaktionen mot kvinnofrågan* (1886) [On the Reaction to the Woman Question] in which she was highly critical of the Swedish women's movement, including the Fredrika Bremer Association. Key argued that men and women should not compete in the same spheres of life. Instead, she argued, women belong at home with their children, and men belong on the paid labor market (Nermo, 1999). These ideas were part of a public debate that centered on the work of skilled blue-collar women during night shifts. In 1909, the debate culminated in legislation banning women from nightshift work in factories (Nermo, 1999). Prussian-born Hedwig Dohm cited Ellen Key as an anti-feminist in her *Die Antifeministen* [The Antifeminists] (Ambjörnsson, 2012). This is to say that women's struggle for gender equality was met with opposition through legislation and societal discourse, which can be connected to anti-feminism.

Agriculture continued to employ more people than industry even into the first few decades of the twentieth century (Nermo, 1999). Following its decline, urbanization and industrialization transformed Sweden into an industrial economy. These changes radically affected women's and men's lives (Nermo, 1999). As Wikander (1991) writes, "without falling into any nostalgia for older times [...] women's areas of competence before industrialism were many and just as demanding both physically and educationally as men's" (p. 10). But this was a different world. Industrialism gave way to a society further stratified by class, which fostered different ways of being and living as a woman. Upper-class women, for instance, were seen as more childlike; they refrained from "hard physical labor, stayed indoors and laced themselves up in corsets [...]. They lived inside their homes, often became pale, frail, and fainted easily. They seemed different and defenseless" (Wikander, 1991, p. 15). Working-class women, in contrast, were viewed as less developed, stubborn, strong, and resilient (Wikander, 1991). Women were not a cohesive group; they were differentiated along intersectional lines. As a result, working class women were exploited through hard labor early on.

Nevertheless, all women were granted full suffrage in 1919, allowing them to vote in municipal and national elections. This was achieved through "goal-oriented and sometimes militant work" of the women's suffrage movement, mainly through middle- and upper-class women in *Landsföreningen för kvinnans politiska rösträtt* [The National Association for Women's Political Suffrage] and working-class women in *Socialdemokratiska kvinnorörelsen* [The Social Democratic Women's Movement] (Östberg, 1997, p. 9), marking the official start of the first wave of feminism. One of the organizers of the Social Democratic women's movement said, "We know that men, in the big picture, do not want us to be able to vote" (SOU 1997: 113, p. 43). And, indeed, many men downplayed the work done through the women's movement. Prime Minister C. G. Ekman said, "Almost as a result of the world war, women obtained municipal and political suffrage and thus civil equality" (cited in Östberg, 1997, p. 10).

In 1961, Eva Moberg published an article from a radical liberal perspective titled *Kvinnans villkorliga frigivning* [The Conditional Release of Women], arguing that Swedish women had not yet been granted complete freedom as individuals (Forsås-Scott, 1997). Women were still constrained in their educational and career choices—and they were still doing all the care work. Moberg’s article was a cutting criticism of Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, who wrote *Women’s Two Roles: Home and Work* (1956), which advocated that women adapt their paid work to their role as mothers by staying at home until their children reached school age (Forsås-Scott, 1997). Moberg’s rebuttal was simple: only a transformation of the role of men could improve women’s situation—the focus, she argued, should be on shifting the collective to view both men *and* women as human beings. This so-called radical idea opened the doors for similar writing like *The Changing Roles of Men and Women* (1967) and several sociological studies that substantiated Moberg’s claim: it is not only the mother who can provide adequate care for young children, but the father also plays a crucial role (Forsås-Scott, 1997). This would begin a shift toward a dual-earner/dual-carer model. In the book *Swedish Women, Swedish Men* (1968), a government official at the National Swedish Labor Market Board, who later became a Swedish Social Democratic politician, Anna-Greta Leijon, highlighted that this would require a transformation of the whole society in the form of, as she famously put it, a bloodless revolution (Florin & Nilsson, 2000).

Ignited by the ongoing debates, a second wave of the feminist movement washed over Sweden at the beginning of the 1970s. A new concept was constructed to describe how relations between women and men *ought* to be: *jämställdhet*, or, in English, gender equality. In Swedish, this concept literally means to “stand equal” (Hirdman, 2003). It does not emphasize *being* equal. As Florin and Nilsson (2000) write: “It expressed no power relation and it was disembodied—it had no sexual undertones—the sexes were only supposed to be placed side by side as two abstract beings, symbols or ideal types” (p.13). This concept, however, did mark a new phase in the relationship between men and women—a new “gender contract,” as Hirdman (1988, p. 15) calls it. The concept of gender equality gained widespread acceptance because it was perceived as “class-bridging,” and, as Florin and Nilsson (2000) note, it sounded harmless. Hirdman (2014) relates this to *Jantelagen* [the Law of Jante], which is known for characterizing egalitarian values in Scandinavia: You should not believe that *you* are *someone*. This is important to address, as it shows that the power relations in Sweden have enabled, shaped, and constrained the social, cultural, and political meanings that the struggle for gender equality has taken. That is, gender equality was conceptualized politically to emphasize consensus rather than conflict, meaning that many could gather around it “even if it was interpreted differently by different actors in practice” (Florin & Nilsson, 2000, p. 9). Upon naming the problem of women’s rights and equality, “discourse became politics” (Hirdman, 2003, p. 166).

## Gender Equality as Politics in Sweden

In 1972, Olof Palme's speech at *Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti* (SAP) [the Swedish Social Democratic Party] Congress was a cornerstone (Florin & Nilsson, 2000), marking the beginning of gender equality as an official governmental policy in Sweden. It is important, however, to see this speech in the context of feminist struggle, in which women fought to have the gender inequalities they experienced recognized. For example, two years earlier, Palme (1970) gave a speech in the United States to the Women's National Democratic Club titled "The Emancipation of Man," where he argued that there had been enough talk about emancipating women and that there should be more discussion about emancipating man. This was his attempt to make a play on words in English to argue that the effort should be about emancipating human beings, not *only* women. In taking this approach, however, he centered men by making women's struggle invisible.

Palme's SAP speech in 1972 then recentered women partly as a reaction to pressures from *Stockholms arbetarekommun* [Stockholm's workers' labor union] to the party congress and *Arbetsgruppen för låginkomstfrågor* [Working Group for Low-Income Issues]. Together, these groups argued for the formation of a delegation directly under the prime minister to address women's issues on the labor market in particular (Hirdman, 2014). The latter group even suggested that the delegation, which they thought should be composed of representatives from the state, the municipality, and the labor market partners, should have a permanent secretariat. Anna-Greta Leijon is quoted as saying that it required "hard work" and "putting pressure" on Palme to motivate him to act. Seeing that this worked, Leijon exclaimed, "We felt invincible!" (Florin & Nilsson, 2000, p. 70). However, another pressure for recentering women was the "dark thundercloud that needed to be dealt with"—the second feminist wave (Hirdman, 2014, p. 31). It is against the background of women's political organization, rather than Palme's common framing as a national gender-equality hero, that I frame the resistance against power relations constraining political and social progress in gender equality. This means that instead of taking Palme or other politicians as the symbolic actors in making gender equality into politics, the women pushing for these politics should be made visible.

During his speech that October day, Palme (1972) made five key proclamations, which set the political ball in motion. First, he argued that gender equality must be the foundation for work, meaning women have the right to work. Second, he said this requires expanding care for children. Third, that discrimination against women hinders their freedom, emphasizing that all Swedes should support women. Fourth, that women are strongly underrepresented in political initiatives and organizations, and this needs to change. And fifth, gender equality impacts society as a whole, and reforms should have a holistic perspective. In closing, he said:

Many women today experience despair over the slowness of social change. It is completely understandable. It can also be seen as a result of the incipient liberation that has taken place in practice, especially in the last decade, and of the increased awareness among

women. But the result can never be achieved by isolated groups. Even though women's liberation must, to a large extent, be their own work, we will never achieve the results unless the demand for gender equality is carried forward by women and men together within a large popular movement that focuses its efforts on the change of society towards increased freedom and greater community.

However, as Hirdman (2014) argues, Palme's description of the actors in the feminist movement as isolated groups was his own wishful thinking. She writes: "they spread like angry germs and infected old and somewhat tired women's unions and associations with their new radicalism" (Hirdman, 2014, p. 31). They were organized and determined not to back down. Again, it is essential to remember the women behind the push for this shift in politics. *Delegationen för jämställdhet mellan kvinnor och män* [The Delegation for Gender Equality between Women and Men] was established formally in December of the same year.

Following successes in guiding government agencies, creating policy, and conducting research, the delegation was reformed into an equality committee with representatives from different political parties at the end of 1976 (Hirdman, 2014). The rationale was that gender equality issues should be addressed by a parliamentary committee, rather than being framed solely as a social democratic issue. In 1979, Sweden enacted its first gender equality law, which took effect in July 1980 (Hirdman, 2014), and officially granted men and women equal rights and opportunities, particularly in the areas of work, employment, and development. The idea was for the Swedish welfare model to promote gender equality through, as Palme partially outlined, universal childcare, parental leave, and eldercare policies enabling women to participate in the labor market on similar terms as men (Hirdman, 2014). This foundation was believed to reduce women's dependence on husbands and transform family relationships into a partnership of equals rather than one based on economic hierarchies. However, even if the law was enacted to improve working conditions for women, it did not do so by using the concept of "women," instead the power relations that define the gender order were obscured through gender neutrality (Svensson, 1997). Finally, after enduring numerous revisions throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Gender Equality Act became obsolete in 2009 when it was replaced by the Discrimination Act (SFS 2008:567).

Sweden's primary strategy for achieving gender equality has been gender mainstreaming since 1994 (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2025). According to the Swedish government, this means that a gender equality perspective should be considered in all policies that affect people's conditions, so that all women and men, girls and boys can live equal lives (Regeringen, 2024). In 2006, the *Riksdag* [the Swedish Parliament] unanimously established four goals for the gender equality policy, and in 2016, two more goals were added (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2022). More recently, at the end of September 2025, a seventh goal was added (Regeringen, 2025a). The overarching goal of the gender equality policy is for women and men to have equal power to shape society and their own lives. As historians Berggren and Trägårdh (2015) argue, this is also the paradoxical core

of the Swedish social contract: through a community, individuals are free from interpersonal dependency. From this ethos, the seven gender equality policy objectives (Regeringen, 2025b) are more specifically:

- I. Equal distribution of power and influence. Women and men should have the same right and opportunity to be active members of society and to shape the conditions for decision-making in all sectors of society.
- II. Economic equality. Women and men should have the same opportunities and conditions for paid work that provides lifelong economic independence.
- III. Equal education. Women and men, girls and boys should have the same opportunities and conditions in terms of education, study choices and personal development.
- IV. Equal sharing of unpaid domestic and care work. Women and men should take equal responsibility for domestic work and have equal opportunities to provide and receive care.
- V. Equal health. Women and men, girls and boys must have the same conditions for good health and be offered health and care on equal terms.
- VI. Men's violence against women must end. Women and men, girls and boys, must have the same right and opportunity to bodily integrity.
- VII. Honor-related violence and oppression must end. Everyone, regardless of gender, should have the same rights and opportunities to live without being limited by collectively established honor norms.

Even here, women are not framed as those who experience gender equality problems. Or, said another way: the gender order is not explicit. That is, except for the sixth goal that explicitly names men's violence against women. Moreover, gendered inequalities experienced by people with gender identities beyond the men/boy and women/girl binary are explicitly unconsidered. However, the seventh goal can be interpreted as opening up the possibility of their inclusion with the phrasing "everyone, regardless of gender." Though seen in the context of the overarching and preceding goals, it is not a guarantee that it will be interpreted as more inclusive.

Today, these goals are partly the responsibility of the Ministry of Employment. However, in late 2016, regeringen [The Swedish Government, led by the Prime Minister] decided to establish a new gender equality authority in Gothenburg. The Swedish Gender Equality Agency began operations in January 2018, aiming to collaborate with other societal actors to ensure that gender equality policies have a tangible impact (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2025), for instance, other government agencies, municipalities, regions,

the business sector, and civil society organizations. In organizing gender equality as a political issue, it is easy to assume that it is intended to underpin Swedish society. However, in acknowledging the roots of these politics in opposition and the invisibility of women's and other gender minorities' gender oppression, an air of performativity becomes perceptible. It is the latter that frames my understanding of the image Sweden seeks to project to the world.

## Swedish Gender Equality as Part of the Nation Brand

In the context of Sweden's long history of women's rights, gender equality, and feminist politics, my intention in this section is to show how the Swedish nation brand has been constructed as a strategic asset on the global stage (Swedish Institute, 2025). Nation branding is a corpus of "discourses and practices aimed at reconstituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms" (Kaneva, 2011, p. 118). The Swedish Institute, for instance, was established in 1945 after Sweden was neutral in World War II. Sweden was outside the victor's circle and needed to wipe their "tainted" image clean (Glover, 2009, p. 248). The Swedish Institute is therefore a public agency, funded primarily by the government, tasked with managing, or rather marketing, Sweden's image for international audiences (Glover, 2009; Goedecke & Klinth, 2021). Today, Sweden is viewed as "progressive" (Glover, 2009), "good" (Lawler, 2013), "caring" (Bergman Rosamond et al., 2024), and "tolerant" (Gray et al., 2021); a nation that other countries *should* follow. For this reason, I see the nation brand as fundamentally built to perpetuate "Swedish exceptionalism" (de los Reyes et al., 2002; Shierup & Åhlund, 2011; Habel, 2012).

To establish this nation brand, Sweden must have a strong and well-documented record of being a good, caring, and tolerant nation. This record is exemplified by narratives of exceptionalism grounded in historical legacies, such as two hundred years of neutrality and non-alignment, as well as successes in policy areas, including environmentalism, human rights, and, notably, gender equality (Habel, 2012; Bergman Rosamond et al., 2024). From this perspective, Sweden is a leader in progress and modernity, characterized by high standards of care and ethics, supported by welfare policies, secularism, democracy, and egalitarian principles. This is how Swedish exceptionalism functions as a moralizing discourse, constructing Sweden as a forerunner that has already achieved what others cannot (Goedecke & Klinth, 2021). As de los Reyes et al. (2002) and Habel (2012) argue, this self-image operates through a civilizational logic that reproduces hierarchies between "modern" and "backward" nations, which are often racialized and ethnocentric. This is important because it gives Sweden a global position to influence other countries, making it one of the few nations setting the moral benchmark.

Imaginariness of gender equality are a core part of the construction of the nation brand, which is considered "caring feminist" (Bergman Rosamond et al., 2024), a "women-friendly state" (Hernes, 1987; Borchorst & Simm, 2002), "LGBTQI-tolerant" (Alm, et al., 2021), a "feminist nirvana" (Hansen et al., 2023, p. 3), and a "gender utopia"

(Nordmeyer, et al., 2017, p. 324). This is frequently illustrated with the claim that Sweden is one of the most gender-equal countries in the world. The government typically exemplifies this internationally by citing policies and outcomes that support this image, such as parental leave policies or the high number of women participating in the paid labor market. These examples feed into nationalism, leading most Swedes to feel that they live in a gender-equal country (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2022). Swedes consequently support gender equality and consider it an important part of their identities (Lane & Jordansson, 2020) and personal values (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2022). The Swedish population is accordingly often framed as gender-equal or at least striving for gender equality (Mattson, 2010). Viewing political subjects in this way means that being or striving to be gender-equal is central to being a “good” Swedish citizen. That is, Swedes, and aspiring Swedes, are enabled and constrained by Sweden’s position in the world and are compelled to govern themselves, through what Foucault (1991) might term governmentality, according to what is considered politically correct regarding gender equality. Martinsson et al. (2016) warn that this creates “a hierarchical order between an imagined modern, highly developed ‘we’ and a less developed ‘other’ that lacks those attributes” (p. 6).

Sweden’s nation brand as a leader in gender equality is accepted, celebrated, and preserved beyond its borders by other actors. For instance, it consistently ranks among the top countries in various gender equality indices including the Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum), the Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality), the Gender Inequality Index (United Nations Development Programs), the Social Institutions and Gender Index (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), and the Women Business and the Law Index (World Bank). This has led Sweden to become a “superpower” in gender equality (Goedecke & Klinth, p. 263) and to be seen as a “champion” global leader in gender equality (Elgström & Rosén Sundström, 2025; Towns, 2002, p. 157). Sweden’s political representatives have, as a result, obtained influential roles, for instance, within the European Union (Elgström & Rosén Sundström, 2025; Towns, 2002). It was not shocking then, when Sweden became the first country to adopt a feminist foreign policy in 2014 under Foreign Minister Margot Wallström. Influenced by Sweden, many other countries have adopted (or have stated they will adopt) a feminist foreign policy, including Canada, Luxembourg, France, Mexico, Spain, Libya, Scotland, Germany, Colombia, Chile, Liberia, the Netherlands, Mongolia, Slovenia, and Argentina (Thomson & Wehner, 2025). Sweden’s political influence allows it to exert indirect social, political, and cultural sway over other nations. Gender equality serves as a moral good and political currency in the global marketplace of values (Glover, 2009). Sweden’s nation brand allows it to extend soft power under the guise of care and progressiveness, making it appear that feminist ideals align with neoliberal and neocolonial governance (Bergman Rosamond, 2020; Bergman Rosamond et al., 2024; Kantola & Squires, 2012).

## Swedish Gender (In)Equalities in Policy and Practice

It is essential to distinguish between how gender equality is portrayed as a nation brand and how it is interpreted in policy and experienced in practice. This is because there are many shortcomings in Swedish gender equality policy and practice that should be considered in light of Swedish exceptionalism. This is not “Sweden-bashing” (Marklund, 2016), and I do not suggest that Sweden is not exceptional in any way. Instead, I see Swedish exceptionalism as a foreground, or surface, that renders some gender inequalities invisible. This makes acknowledging Swedish exceptionalism useful to me as an analytical backdrop. It shifts the focus from the nation brand as a strategy for domestic and global social, political, and cultural influence to the nation brand as a limit on what is problematized and possible, both politically and practically. I see this as an important shift because identifying gender inequality problems is deeply tied to determining their solutions (Bacchi, 2009)—if the problems are not seen, they cannot be solved. To further illustrate this argument, I will problematize an example I provided earlier.

It *is* exceptional that in 1974, Sweden became the first country in the world to introduce universal parental leave, allowing parents to stay at home with their young children. It is even more exceptional that this has evolved into parents being entitled to 480 days of paid parental leave per child, with 90 days reserved for each parent to encourage equal caregiving. Notably, compared to other countries, it is exceptional that fathers in Sweden take 30 percent of all parental leave (Försäkringskassan, 2022). What is *less* exceptional, if I step back from a comparative analysis perspective, is that, more than 50 years after the initial implementation of universal parental leave, 30 percent does not change the bottom line: men do less care work than women in this and every other sphere of life in Sweden. Moreover, when they do care work, especially during parental leave, they are publicly glorified for it. For instance, fathers on parental leave have become a symbol of Swedish gender equality on the Swedish Institute website for at least a decade, earning the enduring high-status title of “latte pappas,” which signals the ease of being home with their small children (Björk, 2017; The Swedish Institute, 2025). Johan Bävman’s photo exhibit, titled “Swedish Dads,” features fathers on parental leave. The Swedish Institute has disseminated this photo exhibit to fifty-six countries, contributing to the worldwide framing of Swedish fathers as “exceptional” (Mitchell, 2021). This example illustrates a common critique of Swedish gender equality by gender scholars and feminist activists: a significant gap exists between policy and lived experiences.

The gap between policy and lived experiences cannot be reduced to the difficulties of translating policy into practice. The problems with gender equality policies *and* gender inequalities in practices are deeply entangled (Svensson, 1997). As Nygren et al. (2018) stress, structural limitations make, for example, taking parental leave a strategic decision for many heterosexual couples. The gender wage gap, for instance, contributes to more women in heterosexual relationships taking more parental leave. And, additionally, as formulated in a report by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (Försäkringskassan, 2021),

“The fact that a woman [in a heterosexual relationship] will go on parental leave with her child is often taken for granted, both by those around her and by the woman herself” (p. 5). Policies do not challenge, for instance, the gender binary and the stereotypical assumptions connected to men and women. Instead, many policies derived from feminist politics reiterate and build upon heteronormative discourses through binary constructions. Nygren et al (2018), for instance, argue that “a binary ‘he’ and ‘she’ often implicitly becomes the transformative political subjects of [Swedish] gender equality policy and, as such, excludes other subject-positions” (p. 2). And again, this is just one example; there are many other instances of the gaps between policy and women’s and other gender minorities’ lived experiences (cf. Nordvall, 2023; Gustavsson, 2024; Wemrell et al., 2019).

The gaps between policy and practice constrain real people’s life chances. Sweden, for instance, still has a highly gender-segregated labor market, and status and salaries are persistently low in work done primarily by women, like midwifery, nursing, teaching, and cleaning. The “second shift” (Hochschild, 1989) remains a reality for most women in Sweden, as they continue to perform the majority of household work (SCB, 2022). Many retired women, particularly in rural areas, live on an income below the European Union poverty line (Gustavsson, 2024). Survey data suggest that the lifetime prevalence rates of intimate partner violence against women in Sweden and neighboring Nordic countries are among the highest in the European Union, which has triggered this phenomenon to be called the Nordic Paradox (Wemrell et al., 2019). As a result, Svensson and Gunnarsson (2012) argue that generally:

The Swedish state has shown a lack of ambition to fully challenge the gendered segregation of the labor market, to change the uneven distribution of economic and political power in many sectors of society, and to fulfill the political goal of shared parental responsibilities (p. 1-2).

With this background, I acknowledge that Sweden is exceptional in some respects in terms of gender equality. However, I remain critical of Swedish exceptionalism in this research, seeking to explore the often-overlooked limitations to what is problematized and what is politically and practically possible for gender equality in Sweden.

## Mirror, Mirror on the Wall Who’s the Most Gender Equal of them All?

The gaps between policy and lived experiences have consequences for people’s life chances. When the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) released the 2024 index, it showed that Sweden remains the most gender equal country in the European Union. However, progress has flattened in recent years, meaning it has grown more slowly than other European countries. One might say that this is somewhat of a Snow White phenomenon—Sweden is still the fairest of all the lands, but the threat of that image crumbling is tangible. For instance, since 2021, EIGE (2024) shows that three out of five of the domains that make up the gender equality index decreased in Sweden (– 0.2 points).

The declines are in the domains of money (− 1.5 points), health (− 0.7 points), and knowledge (− 0.3 points). It is important to note, however, that the overall score does not include the sixth domain of violence against women. Sweden’s score for the domain of violence is 37.4 points, which is higher than the European Union average (EIGE, 2024). To understand the inconsistencies between policy and practice, my intention in this section is to examine the lived experiences within the shifting political and economic landscape.

Hirdman (2003), for instance, describes changes in gender relations over time as renegotiations *within* the context of gender equality policy. Initially, she argues, it was evident that the renegotiation was built on the notion of economically self-supporting individuals operating within the welfare state (Hirdman, 2003). However, from the 1980s onward, the Swedish welfare model and economy underwent profound neoliberal changes (Larsson et al., 2012). Government spending has been reduced, welfare services have been privatized, and publicly traded companies now account for a significant share of the welfare sector (Svallfors & Tyllström, 2019). Lane and Jordansson (2020) argue that “Sweden has shifted from a welfare state with collective solutions and inclusiveness towards one of neoliberal governmental rationalities where individual autonomy and freedom of choice are seen as means of achieving gender equality” (p. 28). In line with Lane and Jordansson (2020), the foundations of gender equality in Sweden are being eroded.

The incongruities between policy and practice should also be understood as stemming in part from the difficulty of determining a cohesive, or at least cooperative, perspective on gender equality across different political spheres. Magnusson (1999) analyzed the different perspectives of various political parties on gender equality and found that they employ the concept in fourteen distinct ways. Wernersson’s (2009b) analysis of the stances of Swedish political parties on gender equality, including the Center Party, the Environmental Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party, the Moderate Party, and the Christian Democrats, showed that only the first four parties listed included gender equality in their party programs. Wernersson (2009b) also determined that these parties used the concepts of feminism and gender equality differently. Where gender equality was used to describe the technical aspects of individual freedoms and rights, the concept of feminism was used to describe different political stances aimed at addressing these rights and freedoms. This is to say that even when Swedish political parties frame gender equality as a national value, what they mean when they describe it—and even when they connect it to feminism—varies.

The meanings held by political parties are further complicated by those of other actors in society. Liinason (2017) examined how gender equality is rendered significant and meaningful in various arenas in Sweden. Her analysis included gender-equality policies at Gothenburg University, the government’s understanding of gender equality, and the perspectives on gender equality among representatives of civil-society organizations advocating for women’s rights. Liinason (2017) showed that the underlying meanings of gender equality in these instances differ. The university, she suggests, uses gender equality

to brand itself, while the government fails to be inclusive. Meanwhile, the women's organizations utilize their interpretations to position themselves as authorities meant to save "othered" women. Liinason (2017) consequently describes gender equality as a fundamentally contested concept in Sweden. More broadly, Brunila and Edström (2013) highlight the division over the meaning of gender equality in Scandinavia and accordingly pose the question: Does a "Nordic" gender equality even exist? Sweden's nation brand represents its institutions, organizations, and people—all of whom are collectively compelled to support gender equality. However, as the socio-political and economic context has shifted, the tensions on what Sweden represents have become more pronounced.

## The F-Word and the Gender Fears of the Right in Sweden

Anti-gender and anti-feminist discourses and ideologies are not new in Sweden, as I have noted throughout this chapter. For instance, by pointing to different actors who have discredited or attempted to undermine feminist movements and gender equality. My intention in this section is to show how the global spread of anti-gender and anti-feminist movements in recent years has been facilitated in Sweden by the shifting socio-political and economic context. A Kvinna till Kvinna and EuroMed Rights (2019) report notes that the most recent movements were formed in Sweden around 2014. Broadly, anti-gender and anti-feminist movements are defined by ideologies that discount the concept of gender and gender and feminist theories as a threat to society, traditional values, the heteronormative family, and democracy. Movements that incorporate these ideologies into their rhetoric and actions in Sweden include, for example, *Nordiska motståndsrörelsen* [Nordic Resistance Movement], a Scandinavian neo-nazi movement, and a highly vocal anti-feminist movement called 'jämställdisterna' (Griffin et al., 2016). Through these movements, the imagined collective dissonance favoring gender equality is shattered. Any 'Nordic' gender equality that does improve the life chances of women and other gender minorities is under attack.

As Jungar and Jupskås (2024a) note, the Nordic region has been fertile ground for right-wing populism since the late 1950s, and populist radical right parties in this region are currently stronger than in most other European countries. Their influence is only increasing as the number of voters for populist radical right parties grows (Alm et al., 2020). Off et al. (2022) demonstrate that young men are particularly likely to perceive advances in women's rights as a threat to their opportunities, especially when they perceive institutions as unfair and live in regions experiencing unemployment increases. These ideologies have expanded beyond social movements through ethno-nationalistic political parties in Sweden (Jungar & Jupskås, 2024a). For instance, Off (2023) shows that voters with conservative gender values were offset by heated gender debates in the lead-up to the 2018 national elections, making them more likely to vote for the Sweden Democrats. This means that conservative gender values in particular are one explanatory factor in the rise of the Sweden Democrats (Off, 2023). As a party, the Sweden Democrats, together with

the Christian Democrats, have framed gender equality as both emblematic of Swedish exceptionalism and as a threat that must be destroyed to save the nation (Sältenberg et al., 2024). Notably, the Sweden Democrats is a party primarily composed of men, with policies that tend to appeal more to men (Lodenius, 2018). Anti-gender and anti-feminist discourses, ideologies, and movements should be seen in the context of right-wing ideologies and movements that are rising worldwide, including in Europe (Patternote & Kuhar, 2018). For this research, it means that the deep structural order sustains power relations rooted in patriarchy, which enable, constrain, and shape (im)possibilities for gender equality.

Gender equality politics are largely still standing. However, feminism is being eradicated from these politics. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Tobias Billström, from the Moderate Party, for instance, announced in late 2022 that Sweden would abandon its feminist foreign policy, saying:

Gender equality is a fundamental value in Sweden and also for this government, but we are not going to continue with a feminist foreign policy because the label obscures the fact that Swedish foreign policy must be based on Swedish values and Swedish interests (Granlund, 2022).

In contrast with the nation brand that promotes gender equality, Billström suggests that labeling the country's foreign policy "feminist" competes with the primacy of Swedish values and interests rather than reflecting them. Together, parties like the Sweden Democrats, Christian Democrats, and the Moderate Party have argued that feminism is a leftist political ideology that facilitates "excessive state interference in family life and the pursuit of gender equality" (Jungar & Jupskås, 2024b, p. 117). It is the label "feminist," and not "gender equality," that is problematized here. This, however, is consistent with the nation brand, where feminism is almost entirely absent (Jezeierska & Towns, 2018), highlighting the historical roots of the concept of *jämställdhet* as expressing no power relation, thereby rendering it depoliticized.

The fears of the right, as Butler (2024) refers to them, have developed beyond movement and politics into opposition across various societal arenas. For instance, there is opposition to what is taught in universities that has also developed through anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses on websites like Academic Right's Watch. It has even been formulated in books by academics such as *Den mjuka staten: Feminiseringen av samhället och dess konsekvenser* [The Soft State: The Feminization of Society and its Consequences] (Olsson & Grönqvist Olsson, 2024) and *Genusdoktrinen* [The Gender Doctrine] (Arpi & Wyndhamn, 2020). The opposition to feminist and gender research also culminated in a fake bomb being left outside the National Secretariat for Gender Research in Gothenburg, Sweden, in late 2018, after receiving weekly threats and hate mail (Pettersson, 2018). Anti-feminist and anti-gender opposition is becoming increasingly mainstream and expressed explicitly, leading to tensions in Swedish society. With this in mind, it is clear that determining the direction of feminist politics within this context is also mediated by the

power dynamics between opposition and resistance. This background is fundamental in establishing the field of possibilities for any and all efforts toward gender equality.

## Chapter Two Implications

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that gender (in)equalities in Sweden cannot be understood in isolation from the structural, political, and historical conditions in which they are embedded. By tracing the shift from women's rights to gender equality politics, the institutionalization of gender equality in national policy, and its central role in Sweden's nation branding, I have shown how gender equality has become both a political project and a symbolic marker of Swedish exceptionalism. At the same time, I have highlighted enduring contradictions, including the gaps between policy ideals and lived experiences, as well as the tensions that continue to mark contemporary debates. The implications of this account are twofold. First, gender equality in Sweden is not a settled achievement but an ongoing, contested project, shaped by intersecting forces of patriarchy, class, capitalism, and neoliberalism. Second, any efforts toward gender equality should be viewed as situated within this context and as part of a broader societal negotiation. In the next chapter, I turn specifically to efforts toward gender equality in preschools, examining how they have become a key arena in which these broader negotiations over gender equality are enacted, challenged, and reimagined.

# 3

## The Swedish Preschool: An Arena for Gender (In)equality

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In this chapter, I locate the empirical sociological focus of my dissertation, preschool teachers' work within the preschool as an arena for gender (in)equality in Sweden. I do this by mapping out how preschool teachers and preschools are a part of their historical, economic, political, cultural, ideological, and societal contexts. This chapter informs my first *and* second research questions: In what ways do power relations enable, constrain, or shape (im)possibilities for preschool teachers' gender equality work in Swedish preschools? How do preschool teachers navigate, negotiate, resist, oppose, or (re)produce (im)possibilities through power dynamics in their everyday gender equality work? In connection with the first research question, I open up by discussing how the preschool is the bedrock of gender (in)equality in Sweden. Then, I argue that the Swedish preschool is a primary actor in Swedish gender equality policies. I build on this by showing how preschool teachers are gender equality pioneers. I then, in connection with the second research question, begin by showing how research has highlighted shortcomings in interpreting the gender equality mandate and in gender equality work. I move on to argue that this work is a key arena where regular debate and opposition in Swedish society are done. Together with Chapter Two, this chapter provides the contextual foundations for the empirical analysis throughout this dissertation.

### The Swedish Preschool as the Bedrock for a Gender (In)Equal Society

To establish the Swedish preschool as a bedrock of gender (in)equal society, I will revisit family labor, class, and political histories within the context of Swedish educational institutions. Leading up to the Industrial Revolution, industrialization, urbanization, and democratization created new conditions for Sweden's growing population. Among the significant societal changes that occurred was the emergence of a new family form, which had profound repercussions for women's situation (Tallberg Broman, 1991). This is because the family, as an economic unit, was separated from production. Working-class women and men entered the labor market and were quickly marked as competitors. Resultantly, in the midst of growing class segregation and inequalities, new gender inequalities were created through ideology and legislation. As Wikander (1991) puts it, "another development would also have been possible but was hindered" (p. 21). In other words, capitalism could have been gender-neutral, but patriarchy was already there (Hartmann, 1981). The preschool, as we know it today, needs to be understood as rooted in a history of gender inequality because it is, as I will continue to argue in this chapter, a part of what constrains and shapes it to this day.

In bourgeois families during the Industrial Revolution, the upbringing of young women focused on marriage as the primary aspiration, limiting their roles to unpaid caregiving and thereby reinforcing their economic dependence on husbands (Tallberg Broman, 1991). Working-class women, in contrast, who had no choice other than to apply themselves to industry and various forms of domestic work as the family's supplementary workforce and complementary economic earner, left their children at home with older siblings or relatives. However, with rising rates of crime and begging, many of the societal elites of the upper-class argued that the working-class children needed to be disciplined (Ekstrand, 2022). A school for these children was seen as the solution to "raise the people, and the peoples' children" (Tallberg Broman, 1991, p. 61), and eventually, even working-class families were relieved that they no longer had to leave their children unattended while they worked (Ekstrand, 2022). According to upper-class elites, the conditions of poverty made schools for small children a necessity. This is notable because it indicates a power asymmetry where upper-class elites act on a seemingly patronizing desire to discipline the poor through the creation of schools for young children.

The first schools for small working-class children were *småbarnsskolor* [Infant schools], established around the 1830s. By way of the new steamships of the Industrial Revolution, various actors, including intellectual and close friend of Fredrika Bremer, Frances von Koch, and philanthropist Carl Gustaf af Forsell, made trips from Sweden to England to learn about Infant Schools based on socialist reformer Robert Owen's educational philosophy (Ekstrand, 2022). According to Owen, small children should not be expected to receive a traditional education, as this incomprehensible knowledge was considered unhealthy. The focus should instead be on playing in a warm and friendly environment to foster their ability to discipline themselves through moral education (Ekstrand, 2022). Again, this emphasizes the desire for social control. Though these early institutions were limited in number and primarily located in Stockholm, they became more care-oriented, which some started to problematize. And so, in 1854, inspired by French lawyer and philanthropist Firmin Marbeau, *barnkrubbor*, which literally means "children's cradle," were established. These schools were more structured than the småbarnsskolor and included pedagogical methods for children's early learning development. However, even these institutions were still relatively limited and mainly focused on poor children, offering both care and some early education as a means of discipline.

This time is marked by intense morality debates, where the number of women was high, the number of marriages was low, and birth control was illegal, which resulted in many children born out of wedlock (Tallberg Broman, 1991). Since most women were economically and politically dependent on having a husband, these children who were born "immorally" presented a problem. The problem, the elites decided, could not be solved with barnkrubborna or småbarnsskolor because that would condone immorality. This is important to note because it reflects the roots of the society in the domination of men over women, and it is because of these roots that there needed to be a heavy consequence for women who had birthed a child immorally. One common solution was to have

the municipalities remove these children and place them in foster homes on the countryside. Another solution, resorted to by women from all walks of life, was to seek help from a so-called angel maker who, for a lump sum, “took care of” the unwanted child by starving them into an “angel” (Tallberg Broman, 1991). For a young bourgeois girl, marriage was the only way to establish a secure and stable future. This notably marks the position of women in the deep structural patriarchal orders of society, where, without a husband, they were constrained and destined for hardship.

The *Barnträdgårdenrörelsen* [The kindergarten movement] reached Sweden in 1896, and sisters Ellen and Maria Moberg are often framed as primary pioneers in the movement. The movement itself is built on the work of German educator Friedrich Fröbel as a symbol, which gave some form of “male support” (Tallberg Broman, 1991, p. 92). Beneath the symbol, however, was a culture for and by women, which Tallberg Broman (1991) argues makes it a women’s movement. Or, as Hatje (1999) puts it: there is a political dimension in this knot. It was, for instance, supported by Fröbel’s philosophy that women should be educated for their destiny as the educators of the coming generations. It is essential to acknowledge these historical beginnings because they have significant professional implications (Hatje, 1999). It was because Fröbel was an inspiration and authority for many bourgeois women with little societal influence that they could organize to change their life chances. His philosophy then facilitated access to paid labor deemed suitable for Swedish women in bourgeois families, rooted in what were viewed as essential characteristics of an upper-class woman: caring and nurturing. It was only acceptable for these women to work, to paraphrase Hirdman’s (2003) Virginia Woolf-inspired observation, if they went to their own rooms.

The *barntädgården*, or kindergarten, both of which translate to “child garden,” was more pedagogically structured and emphasized children’s creative development through play, which has had a lasting impact on the Swedish preschool system. The early *barntädgårdens* were also limited in number and were seen as urban innovations primarily for upper-class children due to the fees. The *barntädgården* provided half-daycare and served as an educational complement to the home; the mother retained overall responsibility for care (Tallberg Broman, 1991). The teachers, or the *barntädgårdsledarinna* called *fröken*, were, however, to become professional mothers to the children’s mothers who were seen as amateurs (Tellgren, 2008). The *barntädgårdsledarinna* was a professional title used from 1944 (Hatje, 1999) to refer to an unmarried woman with a bourgeois background, and this type of work was often the only means of supporting herself before getting married. This position can consequently be characterized by what Hatje (1999) calls bourgeois maternalism, indicating, significantly, that it is a gendered and classed position (p. 24). However, due to the higher number of women in Sweden—around 135,000 more than men—many remained unmarried, which kept them in this work, and *this* was seen as tragic and gave them lower status and rank (Tallberg Broman, 1991, p. 95). Taken together, this background provides a foundation for my understanding of the origins of preschool teaching in gender inequality, which I recognize as constraining the status of preschool teachers—even today.

Ellen Moberg argued that when a child did not have a good home life, it was “society’s duty to step in and help (Hatje, 1999, p. 45). In an effort to make this type of care accessible to all social classes, Ellen and Maria Moberg started the folkbarnträdgården in Norrköping in 1904. This project attempted to combine the full-day care of the barnkrubbor with the educational activities of the barnträdgården. Ellen Key’s *Barnets århundrade* [The Child’s Century] (1900), inspired the Moberg sisters to frame children as a project for the future, as a societal investment (Hatje, 1999). This shift is significant to consider because it led to the creation of a new professional role. The ledarinna was now to symbolize a good mother, and the Folkbarnträdgården was to be formed after a good home; this space was intended to be happy, calm, and caring (Hatje, 1999). The mother herself was not expected to share the load in the same way as before. The state provided a mother-figure.

In their book, *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* [Crisis in the Population Question] (1934), Gunnar and Alva Myrdal argued that too few children were being born in Sweden. One of their ideas for increasing the birth rate was that children should not be solely cared for by their mothers, but that responsibility should be shared between the home and society. In this research, this informs my framing of the preschool as a facilitator of gender equality, as it enabled both parents to engage in paid labor outside the home. The following year, in 1935, Alva Myrdal wrote a document titled *Barnen i storbarnkammare* [The Children in the Large Nursery]. The Myrdals are often described as social engineers with significant socio-political influence (Hatje, 1999). For instance, Tallberg Broman (1991) cites Gertrud Olson, who said, “Alva Myrdal [...] she had many cards in her hand and she had advantageous contacts too” (p. 164). From this position, it is essential to note that Alva Myrdal had a distinct perspective on children compared to the Mobergs, which significantly altered the landscape when she introduced *storbarnkammare* [large nurseries]. This was a shift from women’s occupation driven by economic necessity to women’s desire to attain an expert position. A shift meant to impact their social status and life chances. The former paradigm centers on mothers, the home, and society’s needs; the latter centers on children’s needs and is rooted in science, rationality, and theory (Tallberg Broman, 1991).

Tallberg Broman (1991) argues that Alva Myrdal believed that women would struggle for their freedom through collective care and education, making gender equality possible. This, as I understand it, is a redistribution of care work between women, not a shift to distribute it more evenly between mothers and fathers, women and men. This is a shift from private to public patriarchy (Walby, 1990). That is, women were, and still are, the primary ones doing this work, because people often view it as women’s work. In this equation, then, the “empowerment” of women through paid work has depended on the (paid) care work of other women. It is a circular irony that borders on being an oxymoron, and in my research, I see it as creating tension in this work.

## The Swedish Preschool as an Actor in Gender Equality Politics

In 1943, the riksdag [The Swedish Parliament] decided that schools for small kids should now be called *daghem* [daycare] and *leksskola* [play school]. In the 1960s, however, the concept of *förskola* [preschool] was used for the first time in Barnstugeutredningen (SOU 1972:26-27). Albeit these schools were not officially considered preschools at this point, nor were they called preschools in societal discourse. However, it was the beginning of a shift in the *political* language. This is notable and highlights my intention in this section: to argue that the paradigm shift marked the beginning of making small children's schools actors in gender equality politics. Here, it is also important to remember that Palme explicitly emphasized this point in his 1972 speech, stating that putting women to work would necessitate increasing childcare support. And it was at this time that expansion became justified by the labor market, family, and gender equality policy, solidifying it as a pillar of society and making it an actor in gender equality politics. For instance, it emphasized the importance of cooperation between grassroots feminist actions and support from trade unions, particularly Landsorganisationen (LO), as well as the backing of feminists within the political and administrative bureaucracy, which were crucial for the Swedish model (Tallberg Broman, 1991; Hirdman, 2014). And so, by the will of Palme and the new pressures he faced, there was indeed expansion.

The expansion of preschools enabled women's paid work, which increased during the 1970s (Nermo, 1999). This marks a significant practical change in the gendered work-family relationship, as I mentioned in the previous chapter. In this sense, preschools were used to create the conditions for women's gainful employment, even as mothers of young children, in the dual-earner model. The participation of women with children under seven years old continued to rise during the period 1970 to 1992 from 50 to 84 percent participating on the paid labor market (Ds 1993: 8). Women with small children, in 1992, were more likely to work than those without children even during this period, which is marked by economic recession (Ds 1993: 8; Bengtsson & Berglund, 2012). This is essential to my research because it emphasizes the role of care for children in society. It is the so-called work strategy, key to the social democratic welfare state, which prized defamilization, or measures that enabled women to gain more autonomy and economic independence outside their families, for instance through the public provision of childcare (Björnberg, 2012).

The 1990s, however, still characterized a time when Swedish families centered around home and family (Björnberg, 1993). Björnberg (1993) writes, "parents strive to spend as much time as possible together with their children [...] In the balance between paid work and family, parents with small kids usually try to choose their work time so that their children's time at daycare is as short as possible" (p. 182). The *daghem*, from this perspective, was a place to put your kids while you worked. However, yet another shift was around the corner when the *daghem* and *leksskola* were officially integrated into the school system. In 1996, the responsibility for the *daghem* and *leksskolor* was transferred

from the social work department to the education department. For this research, this is understood as the foundation for what the preschool is today. Following this integration, the preschool became part of the national school system. And so, the first National Preschool Curriculum was established in 1998. Five different curriculum versions have been released since then. In the words of Alva Myrdal, “there is no reason to deny that the preschool’s path to its rightful place has been long and arduous” (Tallberg Broman, 2009, p. 26). Today, more than 9,000 municipal and private preschools are part of the welfare services (Skolverket, 2025). These preschools are required to operate in accordance with official laws and regulations, such as the Education Act (2010:800) and the curriculum (Lpfö, 2025). Private childcare has been around since the introduction of paid childcare in Sweden, but it gained popularity in the 1990s. The privatization of preschools is characterized by the presence of publicly funded, but privately run, *fristående förskolor* [“independent” preschools] alongside municipal preschools. This model is significant because it adopts neoliberal capitalist logics, as marketization is intended to increase competition and consumer choice (Reimers & Martinsson, 2017). However, private preschools have sparked debate over the benefits to corporate groups (Mattsson & Riazat, 2025). Regardless, all preschools, whether private or municipal, must adhere to the same quality standards and are supported by public grants paid by the municipalities. All children over the age of one have the right to attend preschool. Of all children in the population between one and five years old, just under 87 percent are enrolled in preschool (Skolverket, 2025). As actors in gender equality politics, this means that all preschools are required to play by the same rules—some preschools with different circumstantial possibilities than others. The outcomes, regardless, impact the majority of children in Sweden.

## Preschool Teachers as Gender Equality Pioneers

The roles of people who care for and educate the youngest children, as paid labor, have changed along with the forms of care and education available. In acknowledging these shifting roles and forms, my intention in this section is to argue that preschool teachers are gender equality pioneers who have struggled to gain legitimacy, because the work they do has historically been devalued in relation to work done by men. This is directly connected to who preschool teachers are and the role that they play in Swedish society. For this reason, my argument begins in preschool teacher education, which has shifted from a two-year seminar-based program to, in 1977, an 80-credit *högskoleutbildning* [college education] (Berntsson, 2006). Since then, it has become increasingly longer and more demanding, resulting from the work carried out by the *Förskollärarkåren* [Preschool Teachers’ Union] (Lindgren et al., 2020). The Education Act (2010:800), which took effect in 2011, reformed the role of preschool teachers regarding the quality of their pedagogical activities and their obligation to align their work with the curriculum mandate. These changes were motivated by the strengthened educational and certification requirements for preschool teachers (Skolverket, 2010). For instance, today, a preschool teacher in Sweden has a

three-and-a-half-year university education of 210 credits. However, the program's particular content is determined at the university level, limited nationally to include three core areas: 1) educational science, 2) pedagogy, and 3) practical education at a preschool (verksamhetsförlagd utbildning, or VFU). After completing their university education, preschool teachers must pass an exam-based certification to become permanently employed. The Education Act (2010: 800) introduced the certification requirement to partly raise the occupation's status through professionalization and clarify what a preschool teacher is authorized to teach (Engdahl & Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2015). In 2002, the average monthly income of a preschool teacher was 18,754 Swedish Krona (SEK) (Berntsson, 2006)—today it is roughly 36,300 SEK, which is slightly below the average income in Sweden (SCB, 2025).

Important for this research in denoting preschool teachers' professional responsibility are the changes to the Education Act (2010:800), aimed at shifting the organization from a flat to a more hierarchical structure to improve the quality of the preschool (Eriksson et al., 2018). This was made even more apparent through a shift in the curriculum's language (Lpfö, 2010), which, for the first time, differentiated between occupational groups with different levels of education working in preschools. For instance, every preschool has a principal, who is required to attend a 30 credit university education over three years during their employment, and in this version of the curriculum (Lpfö, 2010) it was clarified that they are to lead the organization (e.g. preschool teachers, *barnskötare* [childminders], and all other preschool staff including paid carers, substitute carers, administrators, janitors, et cetera) and pedagogy through systematic quality work. Childminders' education is available during high school, municipal adult education, and within colleges. However, there is significant variation in the training, resulting in drastically different educational outcomes (Regeringskansliet, 2024). In this research, I consider it essential to have this in mind because preschool teachers work closely with childminders, who comprise the largest occupational group in preschool settings (Regeringskansliet, 2024).

Regarding preschool teachers and childminders, the curriculum shifted from the general attribution of tasks, such as "the working team shall," in the 1998 curriculum to a specific attribution of tasks, like "preschool teachers shall be responsible for," in the revised 2010 curriculum. Under the specifically attributed tasks, for instance, preschool teachers were explicitly directed to take the lead in interpreting, concretizing, and leading the pedagogical work (Eriksson et al., 2018; Skolinspektionen, 2017). For my purposes, this is what motivates my focus on preschool teachers' professional responsibility. At the beginning of the shift toward a more hierarchical organizational structure, the division of work was often based on an equal distribution of value for all, rather than formal education, knowledge, and competence (Gustafsson & Mellgren, 2008). This has partly been because preschool teachers have found it sensitive to shift roles (Eriksson, 2014) and have tended to prioritize personal relationships and loyalty with colleagues over asserting their professional knowledge (Gustafsson & Mellgren, 2008). More recently, preschool teachers and childminders are dividing tasks based on their professional knowledge and competence (Eriksson, 2014; Steinnes, 2014).

For instance, when possible putting at least one preschool teacher in every class to facilitate pedagogical quality through giving them oversight over and responsibility for the rest of the teacher team. This means that preschool teachers, in this role, have become more clearly responsible for administrative tasks, such as planning and documentation, as well as leadership tasks, including communicating plans and strategies, which is a foundational understanding in this research (Eriksson, 2014; Eriksson et al., 2018). In this sense, it is primarily care situations that they share with, for instance, childminders (Eriksson, 2014; Eriksson et al., 2018; Steinnes, 2014). The differences between preschool teachers and childminders have meaning “for each of their salaries, responsibilities, status, and probably even self-image” (Reimers & Plymoth, 2021).

The Education Act (2010:800) requires preschools to employ preschool teachers. However, the law does not specify the number of teachers required per preschool or classroom. Nevertheless, there has always been a shortage of preschool teachers, resulting in over 40,000 preschool employees lacking job training as of today (Sveriges Lärare, 2025). This is particularly important when considering who does the work in preschools and the preschool teachers’ workload. Of all the preschool teachers, 97 percent are women (SCB, 2025). This has led to relentless attempts over decades to increase the number of men working in preschools with little to no success. Consequently, it is primarily women who undertake this work, albeit in different contexts and under varying circumstances. For instance, some work at preschools, some at open preschools (a preschool-like environment that offers educational activities to children under six years old on a drop-in basis with their accompanying caregiver in attendance), and some in *förskoleklasser* [elementary school preschool classes]. Some preschools even have *förste förskollärare* [first preschool teachers] who take on a more explicit leadership role in their work team, bridging the gap between practical work and management. Preschool teachers are expected to work 40 hours per week, allowing them sufficient time to plan, develop their competency levels, and document their work within this timeframe (Engdahl & Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2015).

Preschool teachers continue to struggle for higher status and wages in their ever-changing work-life conditions. Despite gaining occupational prestige in recent years (2002-2018) the preschool teaching occupation remains of low status (Ulfsdotter Eriksson & Norlander, 2024). Many environments are loud and crowded because most children in Sweden attend preschool. And so, in this research, I have kept in mind that the professional responsibilities of preschool teachers, which have significantly increased over the past decades, are spread across too few. As Alvinus and Svensén (2020) show, the pre-school today is characterized by precarious working conditions, and preschool teachers and childminders experience the preschool environment as a place of crisis. This is something I see as constraining the (im)possibilities for preschool teachers’ gender equality work in Swedish preschools and impacting how they navigate power dynamics in their everyday work.

An essential assumption of mine in this research, however, is that there is great force in preschool teachers' agency and ability to organize—their ability to pioneer toward gender equality. In November 2013, a Facebook group called *Förskoleuppropet* grew to approximately 32,524 members in Sweden (Alvinus & Svensén, 2020). This led to the later development of a website and, in 2018, a movement *#pressatläge*, intending to collect statements and stories from preschool teachers and childminders across the country to manifest political influence, organize demonstrations, and draw the public's attention to the preschools' work environment problems (Alvinus & Svensén, 2020). The *Förskoleuppropet* (2025) website states that they require smaller groups of children, higher staff-to-child ratios, dedicated planning time, and fewer administrative tasks, which Persson and Tallberg Broman (2019) have demonstrated are serious problems in this work. And while it indicates that the last demonstration took place in 2020, the group is still organized through Facebook and continues to hold demonstrations. For this research, I understand this movement in the context of the care crisis in the Nordic Welfare States (Hansen, 2023). That is, in this typically “care friendly” (Vabø & Szebehely, 2012) and “care work friendly” (Wrede et al., 2008) region, the care that is necessary for the continuation of living (a good) life is under threat, the neoliberalizing of waged care work reformed by new public management underpins the aims of preschool teachers' professionalization (Dahl, 2023; Nielsen, 2023). Like their predecessors, preschool teachers and childminders continue to advocate for improved working conditions, often highlighting the devaluation of care work done by women in this effort (Alvinus & Svensén, 2020; Berntsson, 2006). This is important to note because it underlines how the occupation that started as a women's movement remains a women's movement.

## Swedish Preschools' Gender Equality Mandate and Gender Equality Work

Discussions about how to challenge gender inequalities with young children began roughly a century ago. Alva Myrdal (1936) wrote that “Boys as well as girls enjoy doll play, as long as they are not inhibited by the disapproval and ridicule of the adult world around them” (p. 19). More formally, before becoming part of the school system, the *Pedagogiskt Program för Förskolan* [Pedagogical Program for the Preschool] outlined that staff should “know the weight of children's ability to develop a secure gender identity” (Socialstyrelsen, 1987:3, p. 27). However, the understanding that guides my research is that the preschool was explicitly designated as a strategic actor in gender equality when it was established in 1998. This means the preschool is an actor in gender equality politics beyond just facilitating women's opportunities to participate in the paid labor market; it is mandated to do gender equality work as part of Swedish gender equality politics. This is because this work is part of the gender mainstreaming strategy connected to the six primary goals outlined by Regeringen (Wedin, 2021). Consequently, in this section, I argue that this means preschool teachers are expected to be pioneers in gender equality beyond their professional-

ization—they are on the front lines of gender equality (work). This is seen in the flourishing of ideas and research around gender equality work. For instance, there has been a considerable amount of pedagogical development (cf. Eidevald, 2011; Svaleryd, 2002; Lenz Taguchi, Bodén, Ohrlander, 2011; Wedin, 2021), articles (cf. Bayne, 2009; Dolk, 2009; Edström, 2010), and dissertations (cf. Dolk, 2013; Eidevald, 2009; Hellman, 2010; Odenbring, 2010) written about pedagogical gender equality work in the Swedish preschool. Innovations like *Machofabriken* [the Macho Factory] and books like those by *OLIKA Förlag* [Different Publishers] create tools that make gender equality work possible. This is why I frame preschool teachers as subjects who are *expected* to become change agents in addressing a structural issue that contributes to their own subordination, whether acknowledged or not (Amundsdotter et al., 2015). However, as Heikkilä (2023) argues, in a neoliberal context, they are pushed to shift their focus from these structures to individual, yet multidimensional, children.

As part of my feminist sociological focus, I view gender equality work in preschools as taking place within a dynamic socio-political context. For instance, very early on, Tallberg Broman (2002) wrote that the gender equality mandate gives direction for gender equality work through *överordnad skolmyndighetsfeminism* [hegemonic school authority feminism], which politicians and civil servants steer. This is a branch of state feminism that Tallberg Broman (2002) argues has been crucial for the development of preschool as a formal structure and as a welfare state strategy for gender equality. State feminism, in Sweden, is defined by Hernes (1987) as “feminism from above in the form of gender equality and social policy measures, as well as a feminization of professions that are relevant from a welfare state perspective” (p. 153). Today, however, as I have already argued in the previous chapter, feminism is being removed from the vocabulary of Swedish politics. And so, more than ever, Tallberg Broman’s (2002) argument that this work is not “an ideological question connected to power and resource division” (p. 166) highlights an important consideration of depoliticization that has guided my research.

Svaleryd (2002) argued in her iconic book on gender pedagogy that carrying out the gender equality mandate requires both increased knowledge about gender equality *and* knowledge about the educator’s own position and scope as a gendered actor within the preschool’s gender regime (p. 46). This latter focus is not one I see in previous research concerning all preschool teachers. The majority of academic and government research is, for instance, primarily concerned with the former. Government investigations, for instance, highlight issues related to how gender equality work is not being done at the fault of preschool staff. The School Inspection Agency (2017) writes:

Many preschools do not work actively with the gender equality mission. The preschool staff miss out on opportunities to combine an individual perspective on equal treatment with consistent gender equality work that considers and challenges the interests and needs of the entire group, as well as each boy and girl. As a result, the activities do not contribute to making any differences in approach and treatment visible so that it can lead to change work (p. 6).

In line with this, Vallberg Roth and Tallberg Broman (2018) write that “the picture that research gives of gender education in preschool is rather the opposite of the formulated curriculum mission. In many cases, the activities do not counteract traditional gender roles; in several examples, they can rather be said to contribute to them” (p. 21). In a recent literature review, Heikkilä (2023) argues that research continues to support these claims. For my research, this motivates my shift in scope towards a feminist sociological lens. As I have argued throughout Chapters 2 and 3, gender equality in Sweden is not a settled achievement but an ongoing, contested project, shaped by intersecting forces including patriarchy, class, capitalism, and neoliberalism. This means that any effort, or apparent lack of effort, toward gender equality, as previous research indicates, should be viewed as situated within this context and as part of a broader societal negotiation. It is here, in this section of the chapter, that the preschool teachers’ agency within everyday power dynamics becomes more important to examine in the context of the existing body of literature.

Existing research indicates that gender plays a distinct role in various situations with pedagogues, who are either preschool teachers or childminders. Hellman’s (2010, 2016) studies of mealtime situations suggest that gender norms are accentuated in these contexts, but pedagogues tend to reflect less on these norms in care-related contexts. She shows that this leads to the reproduction of gender norms during care-based situations. Eidevald (2009) focuses on four situations often found in preschool: free play, circle time, dressing, and mealtime. He also shows that girls and boys are treated differently. For instance, while preschool pedagogues expected girls to be independent and socially competent when dressing, he observed boys receiving unprompted help with dressing over 60 times (Eidevald, 2009, p. 131). Ärleman-Hagsér and Pramling Samuelsson (2009) similarly show that pedagogues focus on boys, while girls seem invisible in their presence, both verbally and physically. Odenbring (2010) focuses on the multifaceted interaction between children and between children and pedagogues. She shows clear patterns of differentiation based on pedagogues’ reproductive categorizations of girls and boys. Like Eidevald (2009) and Odenbring (2010), Edström (2014) observed that higher expectations are put on girls. She observed that girls are also expected to change to make gender equality a reality. For instance, from a so-called “girly” expression to girls who are positioned as strong, brave, and more independent. At the same time, Edström notes that girls who adopt the latter expressions are perceived as problematic. Märkström and Simonsson (2011) demonstrate that even development meetings between preschool teachers and parents are an arena for (re)doing gender norms. However, in somewhat of a contrast to other research, they show that girls are positioned as “normal” preschool girls when they exhibited “girly girl” behavior, or as tomboys when girls showed resistance to or challenged gender norms.

Ärleman-Hagsér and Pramling Samuelsson (2009) and Dolk (2013) complicate value-based work in the preschool by showing how pedagogues are challenged by children who do not accept directions toward the “right” kind of behavior. Dolk (2013), for instance, shows that children often directly oppose what pedagogues want and seem to be highly aware of norms. There seem, however, to be different consequences for children’s

opposition. Still, research tends to put the blame back on preschool teachers for not doing enough to advance gender equality work. For instance, Månsson (2000) demonstrates that boys who do not heed adults are often described as silly jokers, whereas girls who do similar are perceived as challenging and provocative. Odenbring's (2010) research also shows how pedagogues position girls to help gain control over boys.

Some recent research, however, does show what is working, indicating that preschool pedagogues employ various methods to change gender-stereotypical behavior, including modeling, representation, and gender decoding (Frödén, 2019; Lindqvist & Pastorek Gripson, 2022). Along with Axelsson & Frödén (2021), Tallberg Broman (2018), and Heikkilä (2023), I understand that this research importantly tells us what pedagogues do. Nevertheless, my critique is that it *mainly* emphasizes what is going wrong with gender equality work. As a result, "blame" is primarily placed on pedagogues for their "failures" in pedagogy. This focus limits the problem to the preschool context and the relationship between adults and children, as if in a vacuum. I see this focus as a constraint because it generally overlooks the important connections among preschool, preschool staff, gender equality, and society at large.

There are, however, some isolated empirical suggestions (by which I mean they are scattered across the literature in bits and pieces rather than the focus of any particular research), suggesting that the challenges pedagogues face in gender equality work are more complex than those related to pedagogy. This is important for my purposes because it gives me a trail of crumbs, you might say, to follow in my critical exploration. For example, Eidevald (2009) argues that pedagogues' perspectives impact children's gender expression. He stresses that their often unconscious theoretical presuppositions affect what is (im)possible for children's gendered expression. Emilson et al. (2016) demonstrate that pedagogues' gender beliefs shape their approach to gender equality work, exposing value dilemmas tied to social norms and femininity. Warin and Adrian (2017) illustrate that five male preschool pedagogues understood gender through implicit beliefs influenced by socio-political discourses. Edström's (2014) study shows that some pedagogues perceive their roles as ways to tackle societal issues, such as labor-market inequalities, and that feminist perspectives influence some in their approach to gender equality mandates. She points out that pedagogues who neglect gender equality either lack interest or do not see it as a problem. Heikkilä (2020) states that preschool and school pedagogues in several Nordic countries have become aware of gender equality as a personal interest, which may explain why it does not permeate organizations. Together, these studies suggest (but do not explicitly claim) that preschool pedagogues are political actors within society, expected to carry out gender equality work in preschools for pay. For my research, these results inform my own framing of how preschool teachers approach their work.

Beyond how preschool pedagogues interpret the gender equality mandate and engage in gender equality work, some preschool teachers' identities have also been extensively problematized in previous research, prompting me to consider another layer of complexity. For instance, there is a relatively large body of literature on male preschool teachers that frames them, or rather their bodies, as part of gender equality work in the

preschool (cf. Børve, 2017; Havung, 2000; Heikkilä & Hellman, 2016; Hedlin & Åberg, 2013; Hedlin et al., 2019a; Hedlin et al., 2019b; Nordberg, 2002, 2005; Sumsion, 1999; Warin, 2018; Wernersson, 2015). This literature emphasizes masculinities and what men bring to and experience in their work in the preschool, in contrast to women. I see this as similar to the comparisons made between girls and boys in the other literature I have included in this section, focusing on differences between men and women and boys and girls. In this research, I have instead aimed to move the focus beyond comparisons between binary categories with a broader scope rooted in queer and intersectional understandings of gender.

Taken together, a significant portion of the research I have cited in this section focuses on the pedagogical approaches employed by preschool pedagogues, putting them on the front lines of gender equality work. Other contributing factors to gender equality work in preschools are rarely considered, only considered briefly, or not put into focus. Moreover, it is primarily the things that are going wrong or need improvement that are focused on. When I have considered the research related to what pedagogues are not doing, the opposition they experience from kids, what preschool teachers believe, perceive, know, and are aware of, as well as the research that focuses on men in preschool, I have been struck by the limited focus on power relations and dynamics across the literature. With that said, for my research, I find it interesting and valuable to look elsewhere and try to understand—are there any other feminist sociological explanations for why it is not working? Is *anything* working? These questions serve as the catalysts for my research, in which I, through feminist sociology, center power relations and dynamics to critically explore the (im)possibilities of achieving gender equality.

## Who is Afraid of Gender Equality Work in Swedish Preschools?

Moving forward, I intend to provide more contemporary sociological context for gender equality work to make clear why it must be understood through a power lens. Gender equality work in schools and preschools is opposed all over the world. The late Pope Francis said that teaching gender in schools is “ideological colonization.” He argued, “the same was done by the dictators of the last century...think of Hitler Youth” (quoted in Butler, 2024, p. 7). In this context, I want to make it clear that not everyone outside of Sweden is goo-goo over the gender equality work done in Swedish preschools. Egalia Preschool in Stockholm, for instance, was founded on an anti-discriminatory, gender-critical pedagogy and became the subject of similar remarks in Denmark. Lykke (2016) writes that “Egalia was discursively constructed as a symbol of Swedish gender-political correctness that aimed at erasing sexual difference and, in a quasi-Stalinist vein, forcing children into sameness and crushing creativity and individuality, both of which were constructed as growing out of binary difference” (p. 121). Lykke (2016) notes that many argued that these types of preschools are especially damaging for boys, “who were already

enrolled in a female regime due to the statistical fact that the majority of kindergarten teachers are women” (p. 121). Egalia was forced to close its doors in March 2024.

In the contemporary context of Sweden, I consequently understand opposition to gender equality efforts within the broader anti-gender and anti-feminist discourses, movements, and stances of various political parties. As Lykke (2016) shows, the comments about Egalia in Denmark are similar to those in Sweden. She writes that Danish blogger Anne Sophie Hermansen wrote “stupefying gender madness” about Egalia in a similar way conservative and anti-feminist Swedish blogger Tanja Bergkvist uses the phrases “gender madness” and “the stupefying industry” when referring to gender politics, gender studies, and feminism in Sweden (Lykke, 2016, p. 122). Moreover, within Sweden, even the politicians speak out against gender equality work in preschools. Sweden Democrats outright oppose gender pedagogy (Verloo, 2018a), and the Christian Democrats party leader has called gender equality mandate formulations *genusflum* [“gender fluff”]. The Sweden Democrats have described gender pedagogies as “attacks on children’s identity”, unrealistic, and deeply unscientific (Lodén, 2018, p. 14). In February 2025, Sweden Democrat Politician Sara Gille (2005) argued that the goal of “breaking traditional gender roles” in preschools lacks scientific support and that it does not improve academic performance. However, the goal of breaking traditional gender roles has not been in the curriculum for nearly a decade. Moreover, the report (e.g. Heikkilä, 2023) she cited to argue that there is a lack of scientific support does not make any such claim.

Societal opposition has become increasingly commonplace in recent years. For instance, there has even been an uprising of right-wing activists and politicians threatening drag queens reading books for children in preschools and public libraries in Sweden (Housten, 2023). A Black Swedish boy, who was the face of Swedish department store Åhléns’ Christmas campaign, faced social media backlash in his role as St. Lucia (Gray et al., 2021). Physician and academic David Eberhard released the book *Det stora könsexperimentet: Så uppnår vi riktig jämställdhet* [The Great Gender Experiment: How to Achieve Real Gender Equality] (2018). The book description on various websites where it is sold opens with the questions: “Gender paradise or gender nightmare? What happens when children are called ‘hen’ and are not allowed to be called boys and girls at daycare?” Here, he takes a double blow at gender equality work and at the preschool, which is no longer a daycare, as I have already shown. In a debate article, Eberhard (2017) argues that preschools contribute to the indoctrination of children, who, he claims, are biologically different according to gender, a notion he argues is based on empirical evidence. He closes by arguing, “let’s end this religiously driven unscientific nonsense and let children be who they are. Let boys be boys and girls be girls” (Eberhard, 2017). It is within this context that I have wondered why there is so much opposition to gender equality work in preschools, if, as previous research and government reports suggest, it is not working. I have, as a result, formed the assumption that gender equality work constitutes not only a professional task but also an arena of societal debate and contestation—an arena for opposition to gender equality.

## Chapter Three Implications

In this chapter, I have located preschool teachers as lead actors in the preschool as an arena for gender equality (work) in Sweden. This demarcates the feminist sociological focus of my dissertation, preschool teachers' relational power in shaping gender equality work in Swedish preschools. This chapter has enabled me to home in on the terrain within which my first two research questions take shape. Specifically, I have demonstrated that preschool teachers in Sweden are the bedrock of gender (in)equality and, as a result, central actors in national gender equality policies. As Folbre (2001) suggests, care work is the invisible heart of society—it is not an expenditure, it is the bedrock on which everything is built. I have also highlighted how preschool teachers, in particular, through their professional responsibility, have become gender equality pioneers while navigating the tensions and shortcomings that research has identified in interpreting and enacting the equality mandate. I have even argued that gender equality work in the preschool constitutes an arena for opposition. Taken together, the implications of these feminist re-tellings underscore the key role that preschool teachers play in understanding the everyday enactment of gender equality work in Sweden. They also clarify why preschools are a particularly revealing site for examining how power relations enable, constrain, and shape (im)possibilities for preschool teachers' everyday power dynamics in gender equality work. Alongside Chapter Two, this chapter provides the contextual foundation, the motivation, and the background for the theoretical choices and empirical analyses that follow.

In this compilation dissertation, the specific ways I put theory to work are spread across four articles. However, the articles are bound together with a theoretical thread, or a *röd tråd* (red thread) as we say in Swedish. The theories are closely intertwined with my aim to critically explore how power relations shape the (im)possibilities of gender equality work in Swedish preschools, and how preschool teachers navigate the power dynamics related to gender equality work in their everyday practices. This aim has shaped my three overarching research questions:

- I. In what ways do power relations enable, constrain, or shape (im)possibilities for preschool teachers' gender equality work in Swedish preschools?
- II. How do preschool teachers negotiate, resist, oppose, or (re)produce (im)possibilities through power dynamics in their everyday gender equality work?
- III. When is gender equality work (im)possible, and why?

In this chapter, I intend to demonstrate what theory *is* and *does* for my research by outlining how theory is a lens orienting me, how it has guided my analyses of empirical research material, how I have critiqued and consequently refined and extended theory, how I have re-interpreted theory, and how some of the theory I use borders on method. First, I begin by broadly arguing how I put theory to work as a means of thinking with my material, exploring what might explain or illuminate the research material. Here, theory is activated — it works with me in the process of sense-making abductively, moving back and forth between empirical surprises and theoretical concepts, with each reshaping the other. Then, I synthesize concepts and theories deployed in this dissertation, beginning broadly with the big theoretical ideas like power, situated knowledges, gender, and gender (in)equality in order to home in on preschool teachers as leaders in the preschool, a gendered organization and an arena for gender equality (work) in Sweden.

### How I Put Theory to Work: Breaking Rules and Dealing with Tensions

In an old Indian folk tale about the six blind men and an elephant, each man touches a different part of an elephant—one feels the trunk and thinks it is a snake, another the leg and believes it is a tree, and so on—leading them to argue because each assumes his perspective is *the* truth. The tale illustrates how each man's understanding is rooted in his positionality and prior knowledge when a man with sight walks by and reveals such. The man with sight says that each of their experiences revealed a partial truth, and if they put them together, they would find they were in the company of an elephant. In this sense,

the man with sight revealed *the* truth. My overarching strong stance is that the contours of any scientific phenomenon cannot be approached solely through the sense-based rationality of the man with sight. We cannot expect scientists to “reveal” *the* truth. Instead, my understanding is that scientists must rely on an array of theoretical assumptions and tools grounded in key concepts and frameworks. For my research, this means that, in line with Haraway (1988), I do not view researchers—or any being—as the man with sight is portrayed—as a god-like outsider with an objective perspective.

My perspective is that neither the phenomena we study to create empirical knowledge nor we, the scientists, exist in a vacuum. The specific social, material, historical, and political contexts shape us and the phenomena we study. These contexts shift over time and space, meaning that what and how we come to know something scientifically is also shaped by those conditions. Scientific researchers, from this perspective, are more like the blind men, since we work from our different positionalities to build a theoretical foundation to give meaning to our empirical material. It is the theories we put to work that facilitate what can be analyzed. From this perspective, I do not use theory as a passive description of reality, but a tool that actively influences what a scientist focuses on, effectively determining the scope of what can be known and understood. As Connell (1987) argues, “theories don’t grow on trees, theorizing is itself a social practice with a politics” (p. xi). This means that the theoretical foundations and the resulting knowledge of research depend partly on the researcher, who collaborates with others in the academic community and in the world to collectively determine the usefulness of their scientific practices—do the results of analysis help us give meaning to our individual and shared realities? Science is consequently a social rather than individual activity (Longino, 1990).

I draw on critical theories, broadly speaking. The theoretical framework has been derived from perspectives that are useful to the empirical research material in this critical exploration, which seeks to question power relations and dynamics, inequalities, and domination, with the aim of highlighting (im)possibilities for resistance, solidarity, emancipation, and just conditions in society. And so, as defined by Amy Allen (2017), when I say critical theories, I mean:

In a more capacious usage [...] any politically inflected form of cultural, social, or political theory that has critical, progressive, or emancipatory aims. Understood this way, critical theory encompasses much if not all of the work that is done under the banner of feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, and post- and decolonial theory (p. xi).

Taken together, these theories have their historical roots in, for instance, the Frankfurt School, Post-structuralist reworkings, social constructionist twists, anti-racist/decolonial critique, and (new) material varieties. For this reason, critical theory is a hallmark of theoretical eclecticism (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010) and inter- and even transdisciplinarity. This fosters a theoretical approach in this research, facilitating thinking with concepts and theories to create intellectually and practically useful connections that are substantively related but ordinarily framed in separate research paradigms or schools of thought (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010).

The way I put theory to work is not new. Frankfurt School critical theorists, for instance, draw on diverse intellectual traditions to critique inequalities and domination rooted in thought shaped by Karl Marx, Max Weber, G.W.F. Hegel, György Lukács, Immanuel Kant, literary criticism, and Freudian psychoanalysis, among others (Celikates & Flynn, 2023). Haraway (1997) writes, that “‘Critical’ means evaluative, public, multiactor, multiagenda, oriented to equality and heterogeneous well-being” (p. 95). With this, she continues that “Nostalgia for ‘pure research’ in mythical ivory towers is worse than ahistorical and ideological. A better use of our *time*, critical skills, and imaginations might come from considering hope-giving, on-the-ground practices” (p. 95). My approach to theory in this research is, as a result, deeply rooted in feminist thinking. Feminist theorists rarely stay within the boundaries of a particular field or discipline, and many frequently break the “rules,” crossing ontological and epistemological borders and smashing paradigms along the way. This is intentional. The purpose is to break down the traditional “malestream” theory rather than just add gender on (Abbott, Wallace & Tyler, 2005) to identify tools to think with. As Stanley and Wise (2000) argue, we can work within tensions and contradictions because this is how we experience reality. This is how we live.

This approach serves as a useful springboard, facilitating ontological hybridity —a shift from “either/or” thinking to “not only but also” thinking, which emphasizes complexity, interdependence, and transition (Chadwick, 2013). What I mean is that I simply reject single-explanation ontologies (gender as *only* discourse, *only* material, or *only* structure) by instead holding them together as co-constitutive. This ontology necessitates an epistemological pluralism, which “rests on the contention that epistemology is a matter of practice in which issues of context, process, and procedure and not metaphysical or ontological abstractions take precedent” (Healy, 2003, p. 689). That is, only multiple ways of knowing can grasp the multidimensionality of *what is* and the various ways in which *what is* operates. Consequently, I have not seen coherent, ontological, or epistemological systems, universalism, or grand theories as maximally productive in analysis. Instead, I see *committing* to a theory before engaging with the research material, and according to one school of thought, or paradigm, as a risk for flattening the analysis. And so, the approach I take grinds against the rigid theoretical borders created between academic disciplines and beyond. It is, in itself, a way to challenge power relations. I ground this understanding in hooks’ (1990) concept of yearning, like Haraway (1997), which is:

an affective and political sensibility allowing cross-category ties that ‘would promote the recognition of common commitments and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition’ (hooks 1990, p. 27). Yearning must also be seen as a cognitive sensibility. Without doubt, such yearning is rooted in a reconfigured unconscious, in mutated desire, in the practice of love, in the ecstatic hope for the corporeal and imaginary materialization of the anti-racist female subject of feminism, and all possible subjects of feminism (p. 191-192).

Yearning allows me to critique how simply applying theory can reproduce problematic exclusions or blind spots in analysis. And so, while I draw inspiration from theoretical understandings, I must first determine how they will inform my understanding dialogically and how they will help me think about my research material before I can determine if they

will yield analytically productive insights. This has led me to develop, reinterpret, or translate theoretical understandings to make them work for my research material. This is not new. To drastically oversimplify this logic: Allen builds on Arendt, Butler builds on Foucault, Ahmed on Butler, Barad on Bohr, Haraway on Harding, et cetera. I, like others, build arguments that connect and synthesize different theoretical ideas, taking them in new directions with my research material, just as others have done before me. This approach enables me to shape what theory can do by reworking theoretical concepts and frames, developing, refining, and modifying them according to empirical material and my analytical needs.

This perspective is not an attempt to introduce unnecessary nuance. To use the words of Healy (2017), “fuck nuance,” for the sake of nuance (p.118). My objective is to enhance the process of abstraction that makes theory valuable, i.e. analytically and empirically productive (Healy, 2017). As Black Panther Fred Hampton (1969) said, “Theory is cool, but theory without practice ain’t shit!”. For this research, this means that abstract approaches that are disconnected from the research material are meaningless. I have sought to maintain an openness. But I want to be clear: this is not objectivity; it is an acknowledgment of my assumptions, rooted in my understandings of previous research and theories that might explain the phenomena, and the act of questioning these through engagement with the research material. Of course, even these engagements are limited by my knowledge and that of those who have engaged with this research through reading, reviewing, or discussing it. My processes for determining which concepts and theories to use are consequently not based on “value-free” objectivity and detachment, but rather on abductive reasoning. I have my assumptions, which I have noted in previous chapters and will note in this and the following chapters. However, I have also sought and developed theoretical tools to further guide my understanding and facilitate the analysis of my research material.

The way I put theory to work is an ethical stance in this research. I continue to think of the lives on our planet guided by Carl Sagan’s (1995) comments in his book *Pale Blue Dot* on an image of Earth taken by Voyager 1 on 14 February 1990. He said, “There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we’ve ever known” (p. 11-12). And so, my goal has been to conduct this research through our shared responsibility to each other and to all life on this planet, striving to create community and connection. As Nygren et al. (2018) argue, this effort aims to develop agendas for hope, thereby opening our imagination to find solidarity across conflictual locations, experiences, and visions. This effort, they (and I) argue, is made possible through the political bridges that feminist researchers build across diverse understandings that deepen analysis connected to “highly connected regimes of oppression and exploitation” (Nygren et al., 2018, p. 5). And this is where I begin: with power.

## Doing Power: Deep Structures, (Im)possibilities, Opposition, Resistance

As my research aim and questions suggest, the primary theoretical concern in this dissertation is power. Power is a contentious concept, and I want to clarify that I do not use or apply a general understanding of it in this research. As Lukes (1986) puts it, the variations in what aspects of power we focus on run deep, and what unites views of power is too thin to “provide a generally satisfying definition, applicable in all cases” (p. 4-5). For this reason, my intention in this section is to demonstrate how Allen’s (1999) feminist conception of power informs my understanding, critique, and analysis, as it offers a multidimensional framework for addressing gendered subordination (p. 121). Drawing on the work of neo-Marxist and critical feminist thinkers, including Hartsock (1987) and Young (1990), this conception of power incorporates an understanding of structural domination with Butler’s (1993) thinking on agency and performativity and Arendt’s emphasis on collective resistance and action. Tying these elements together, Allen’s (1999) conception of power is also Foucauldian in the sense that it is relational and productive rather than possessed by any individual actor.

From this perspective, power relations structure our social situations societally through deep structures, or deep structural order, as I sometimes call it, is a complex, underlying, and relatively stable background perspective (Allen, 1999). Deep structures are the broad social, cultural, political, and institutional “doings” that diffuse power relations across different enactments. You could say that they carry the manifestations or artifacts of power relations. For instance, the deep structures can be said to maintain a power relation defining a gender order based on patriarchy, which I, briefly and vaguely (for now), define as men’s dominance. Deep structures are not always visible, but they shape which interactions are likely or even possible (Allen, 1999). Like Lukes’ (2005) power perspective, this understanding advances the idea that power is not always observable; rather, it is “at its most effective when least observable” (p. 1). In contrast, what is observable is what Allen (1999) calls the foreground or surface perspective. From the surface perspective, I understand concrete everyday situations as constructing the interplay between the power relations and individuals. To paraphrase Foucault (1988, p. 36), power relations are made and therefore they can be unmade. For this reason, I have developed and incorporated the concept of power dynamics into this perspective to establish a clear distinction between structure and agency. Power dynamics locate the everyday locally enacted manifestations of power features in concrete social situations through social, discursive practices and/or material shifts. In this research, the concepts of power relations and power dynamics are crucial tools for understanding how deep structures shape and are shaped by different agencies within specific contexts at various levels of analysis.

In further tying power relations and power dynamics together, Allen (1999) argues that deep structures act through “distinct” means, including subject positions, cultural meanings, shared social practices, and institutions (Allen, 1999, p. 121). I, in contrast, see

lived and embodied subject-positions as material-discursive carriers and (re-)creators of cultural meanings and social practices primarily through social norms, I will expand on this in the next section of this chapter. But, for now, what this means is that I see these distinctions as entangled. In the second edition of *The Power of Feminist Theory*, Allen (2025) also makes this entanglement more explicit. It is in this sense that deep structures take form, allowing some to have different opportunities to exercise power or to be subject to its exercise (Allen, 1999; Hedenus, Björk, and Gréen, 2015, p. 26). Domination, the sustained asymmetrical power dynamics constraining agency, is in this way linked to subordination, the lived and embodied experiences of sustained limits to agency structured by power relations.

Deep structural orders delineate the field of possibilities, which I understand to be a dynamic and contingent multiplicity of possibilities that is neither singular nor static, constraining and enabling agency (Barad, 2003, p. 819). I define agency, in line with Allen (1999), as the capacity to act *within* relations of power. The scope of (im)possibilities for agency is always determined by the field of possibilities. By this, I mean that the field of possibilities functions as a boundary, defining what is and is not possible (Foucault, 1982). I find it helpful to think of the field of possibilities with the adage Murphy's Law, which can be said in different ways, including: anything that can go wrong will go wrong, or whatever can happen will happen. For instance, only that which is permissible within a field of possibilities will happen. This means that, given the lens of relational power, the scope of a field of possibilities differs depending on how people are identified and identify within power relations. People who benefit from power relations, and those who do not, have different possibilities within the same field. The differences in possibilities between people give rise to opposition and resistance, which are always implicated as a precondition for power (Foucault, 1980). It is here that there are implications for changes in the field of possibilities, meaning that the potential for change is not static, always in motion, and not linear. And whatever can happen will happen.

This is where Allen's (1999) toolkit for understanding power is based on three particular interests relevant to my research aims and questions. First, there is Allen's (1999) interest in understanding men's domination *over* women. Second, there is her interest in understanding the power *to* act in response to domination exercised by women. Third, there is her interest in the collective power harnessed *with* others from diverse groups of women or allied men. This is very much aligned with my vague patriarchy definition. And while I find the overall framework very useful, I also see it as limiting because it considers only power relations and dynamics between men and women in analyzing women's subordination. My stance is instead that the gender order is characterised by men's power over women, in addition to men's and women's power over people who deviate from hegemonic binary gendered identities. Taking this further, it is even possible to say that the gender order is characterised by white men's and women's power over people who deviate from these identities. To make Allen's (1999) theorization more analytically useful for my research, I have developed and adapted it.

I have queered and made the interests of this perspective more useful for intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989), keeping it tripartite. First, I see the interests as being in domination, which benefits those who are identified and identify according to hegemonic gender norms, enabling the exercise of power over those who deviate from the norms, those who are subordinated. In other words, it does not have to be a person who benefits from this domination who enacts power-over. The people who benefit are those who are seen as normal, or invisible (Lukes, 1974); those who are validated by deep structures, because of their race, gender, sexuality, et cetera. This validation gives them privilege, meaning social and, often, material benefits. A second interest is the power *to* act, or even react, to domination, whether as an individual who deviates from the norm and experiences subordination, or as those who are allied and leverage their own privilege against the norm. A third interest is in the ability to harness collective power *against* domination by those who may also deviate from the norm and experience subordination, or by those who are allied and leverage their own privilege against the norm. Even after these adaptations and developments, my interests are shaped by Allen's (1999, p. 129) distinct features of power: power-over, power-to, and power-with.

Power-over is "the ability of an actor or set of actors to constrain the choices available to another actor or set of actors in a nontrivial way" (Allen, 1999, p. 123). Here, Allen (1999) added "in a nontrivial way" to emphasize that this feature of power changes people's life chances. This aspect of Allen's thinking is comparable to Steven Lukes' (1974) perspective, which posits that three dimensions—decision-making, agenda-setting, and preference-shaping—illustrate one actor's power over another. However, Lukes' (1974) top-down approach only describes the power dynamics of power-over, or different ways of exercising domination. In contrast with a top-down approach, Allen's relational conception emphasizes Butler's (1993) take on agency by saying that domination can be challenged with power-to, "the ability of an individual actor to attain an end or series of ends" (Allen, 1999, p. 126) and power-with which is, "the ability of a collectivity to act together for the attainment of agreed upon end or series of ends" (Allen, 1999, p. 127). It is here that this part of Allen's theoretical toolkit more closely resembles Arendt's (1970) and Gramsci's (1971) conceptions of power, which emphasize relationality. As Gramsci (1971) might have put it, cultural hegemony is never totally immune to resistance; change to structural power relations is possible.

Taken together, I view power as both oppressive, causing subordination through domination, and productive, through individual and collective resistance. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize that these features of power can coexist simultaneously. For instance, where power-over seeks to maintain the field of possibilities done through deep structures defined by power relations, power-to and power-with seek to change or contest power relations by challenging deep structures and reshaping the field of possibilities (Allen, 1999). This has led me to deploy the concepts of opposition and resistance more explicitly, in relation to these features of power. For instance, power-to refers to individual resistance against domination, and power-with refers to resistance through solidarity, or collective resistance, against domination (Allen, 1999). Opposition, in comparison, is

characterized by power-over, and can be done in various ways to (un)intentionally either passively or actively avoid, prevent, or hinder resistance (Verloo, 2018a). These features of power are of utmost interest to me in this research in relation to resistance and opposition. This is particularly concerning the legitimization of some knowledges and the contestation of others, rendering them unintelligible or impossible (Foucault, 1982; Barad, 2007; Haraway, 1988, 1997). And, of course, in the social norms related to doing, redoing, and undoing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 2004). I address both of these aspects in the following two sections.

## Situated Knowledges: Located, Partial, and Political

Knowledges come from somewhere, from someone. Starting from this assumption, and the different perspectives expressed across the material, I have put situated knowledges to work in this research (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 1988). In this section, I intend to present how I think about situated knowledges and how it has aided my analysis of the empirical materials. To start, by adopting this understanding, I challenge the assumption that “the” truth is an inherent quality of knowledge that can be discussed from an objective, “view from above, from nowhere” perspective (Haraway, 1988, p. 589). Instead, I view knowledges as attached to the knower and their particular social, historical, and material contexts. As Barad (2007) argues, “we know because we are of the world” (p. 185). For instance, it is the lived and embodied experiences of inequalities related to class, race, gender, and ethnicity that shape knowledge sources, access, and experiences (Loomba, 2015; Lykke, 2010). Knowledge is always “rooted in a view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body” (Butler et al., 2000, p. 589). Situated knowledges are intertwined with being—knowledges are practices.

Situated knowledges are never neutral or universal (Haraway, 1988). Instead, situated knowledges are partial perspectives. Partiality gives way to the politics of reality, where knowledges are translated, valued, and exchanged unequally, shaping (il)legitimate knowledge (Mouffe, 2005). My assumption is then that knowledge is political, meaning it (re)produces relations of power through a dimension of antagonism, influencing who benefits and who is marginalized (Mouffe, 2005). This is how power relations facilitate the enactment of epistemic domination by creating the appearance of universalizing some knowledges while invisibilizing others. This is not to say that knowledge is purely subjective. Nor does this perspective, unlike standpoint theory (Harding, 1991; Smith, 1974), automatically grant epistemic privilege to anyone. Instead, in deploying situated knowledges, a critique of standpoint theory is put into action. That is, situated knowledges is “a strong tool” (Haraway, 1988, p. 578) that asserts that epistemic privilege is granted through the acknowledgment of our positioning. Only then can we carefully attend to how deep structures constrain and facilitate the processes of knowledge production. This is valuable to my research because it facilitates analysis that weaves together partial knowledges rather than locating authenticity in a single, marginalized experience.

Situated knowledges are the ways of knowing from within power relations dispersed through deep structures. Social norms are shared understandings that express power relations and manifest through deep structures. I see our lived and embodied subject-positions as material-discursive carriers and (re-)creators of cultural meanings and social practices primarily through social norms. By this, I mean that, through being in the world, people become positioned in relation to others and compelled to iteratively comply with hegemonic social norms that appear natural because they are relatively stable over a specific period of time and space. Social norms are based both on normality, or what is perceived as common, “the usual,” *and* normativity, or what is regarded as morally correct, what is “good” (Hedenus, Björk, and Gréen 2015, p. 27). Norms shape and are shaped by the field of possibilities through engagements; they are not deterministic. However, social norms are invisible to people who benefit from them unless they become aware of them. This is part of what I see as shaping situated knowledges. When people deviate from or fail to follow social norms, their movement is reoriented or stopped; we become “out of line” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 66). This makes social norms visible by changing our chances according to lived and embodied experience. This is how I understand and analyze how our different subject-positions contribute to our partial perspectives.

## Deep Structural Gender Order and Doing Gender Intersectionally

The gendered order is a power relation characterized by a patterned system of gendered relations and arrangements in a society. Gendered power relations are (re)made through deep structures as meaningful, for instance, by constraining life chances and the power dynamics of gender subjectification (Allen, 1999; Pascoe & Bridges, 2016). With this in mind, my intention in this section is to demonstrate my understanding of gender as both a structure and an everyday “doing,” rather than an inherent identity, as it orients me in this research and my analyses (West & Zimmerman, 1987). I specifically depend on West and Zimmerman’s (1987) “doing” as a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1954), to facilitate gender as “a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production” (p.126). By this, I mean that this concept sensitizes me to a perspective that partially aligns with Allen’s (1999) perspective: everyday micro-level practices of doing gender (re)produce the macro-level gender order. From this perspective, I view doing gender as unavoidable; in every social situation, our actions are interpreted through a lens of gender. I align this understanding with one of my primary tools, Butler’s (1993) concept of “performativity”, which describes gender as a process that is compelled and constrained through iterability. Furthermore, I build on this concept by drawing on “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1989). My intention in bringing these different concepts into conversation with each other is to make them more analytically productive. For instance, where West and Zimmerman’s (1987) “doing” highlights power relations and everyday interactions, they do not emphasize agency through power dynamics. Relatedly, where Butler’s (1993) concept of “performativity” emphasizes power dynamics,

they do not explicitly connect this dynamic to structural inequalities—but they do emphasize agency. Importantly Crenshaw’s (1989) concept of “intersectionality” emphasizes interactions she sees between gender and other identities, including, for instance, race, class, nationality, religion, sexuality, and ability. Together, these concepts enable me to perceive the structural and everyday (im)possibilities and connect them to agency.

Against this constellation of concepts, I embed the understanding that by doing and challenging gender through our intersecting identities, gender is rooted in lived and embodied experiences that form our situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988; Moi, 1999). This means that my understanding is more than discursive, or based on systems of language, symbols, or practices that produce the objects and subjects they describe (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993). Rather, as Butler (1993) emphasizes, it is crucial to acknowledge how knowledge creation is shaped by embodied experiences, which are influenced by intersecting power relations. This is how knowledges are situated. I, as a result, do not see gender as a monolithic process. Gender is also done through engagement with the world—knowing through being (de Beauvoir, 1949; Barad, 2007). For instance, as hooks (1984) argues, gender, race, class, and sexuality intersect to produce unique experiences of marginalization. Or, as Haraway (1985) puts it:

There is nothing about being “female” that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as “being” female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical *experience* of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism (p. 16).

This lens is crucial in framing my understanding of how we are structured by gender and how we do gender as everyday practice. For instance, with the idea that the categories of “man” and “woman” cannot be viewed as monoliths (Connell, 1995; Mohanty, 1984). Instead, some people experience double, triple, or even quadruple subordinations according to the number of ways their subject-positions deviate from hegemonic norms, including, for instance, heterosexuality, men, and whiteness, reflected in the gender order (Crenshaw, 1989).

I view performativity as directly connected to the iterative doing of norms constrained by power relations. Norms are more than discursive or symbolic—they are materially and historically contingent and unstable. The gender order is constituted by binary oppositional constructions of men/boys as masculine and women/girls as feminine. Masculinity and femininity are gendered practices that reflect the multiplicities of gender norms, shaped across time, space, and other intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Connell, 1995; Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1995). The iterative process of doing these gendered practices in alignment with gender norms may seem to be performed by the subject, but I view it as what enables and constitutes the subject—this is what I interpret as the mechanism that makes gender a structure. Performativity is consequently not a singular act or event; it is a process geared toward gendered intelligibility that shapes and is shaped by the field of possibilities (Butler, 1993; Barad, 2007). In line with Ahmed (2004) and Butler (1993),

it is in this way that gender is made to feel “natural” or “given” by orienting people toward normative ways of being. Gender, resultantly, is not problematic because it is unnatural, but because it is falsely naturalized or reified. From this perspective, gender norms are consequently perceived as connected to a particular gender order, which I see as characterized by men’s power-over women *and* men and women’s power-over people who deviate from hegemonic binary gendered identities (Allen, 1999). This is where my theorizing takes a more distinctly queer turn.

I see gender through Butler’s concepts of heteronormativity and their heteronormative matrix. This is because I see these conceptual tools as a productive way to outline features of hegemonic gender subjectification as binary, rooted in determinist and essentialist biological explanations, while also requiring, expecting, and idealizing heterosexuality (Butler 1990, 2004). The construction of the gender binary in and of itself facilitates a power relation of gendered order, like men’s dominance over women. And, this, along with heteronormativity, describes how genders should be done in accordance with gender practices that are deeply rooted in heterosexuality. I view this as a form of power-over that enforces conformity, or performativity aligned with the beneficiaries of norms that maintain gender inequalities (Simmel, 1957). This creates emotional consequences, such as comfort through safety and mutual understanding (Ahmed, 2004; Allen, 1999; Butler, 2004). This logic extends to other norms, too. For example, gender shapes and is shaped by other norms, including, for instance, whiteness. The intersection of gender with other identities coalesces and makes some bodies “feel at home,” granting them privilege, while other bodies experience discomfort or disorientation by inhabiting spaces not designed for them (Ahmed, 2010; Puwar, 2004). Therefore, I see power-over not only as domination that subordinates some subjects but also as a force that shapes subjects (Butler, 1997, p. 17). The gender order based on these considerations can be further described as a white heteropatriarchy. Throughout my various analyses in this dissertation, I view these power relations and dynamics as part of the root of all forms of gender inequality.

By being compelled to conformity, doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 2004) “correctly” according to heteronormativity only becomes visible through meaningful differentiation. I have developed this concept from Simmel’s (1957) concept of differentiation to emphasize the co-constitutive aspects shaping gender subjectification. For Simmel (1957), differentiation is an effort to distinguish oneself from others. He, for instance, described how high-status groups seek to differentiate themselves materially from lower-status groups through fashion. However, once everyone adopts this style, it becomes impossible to tell the groups apart, so a new fashion is created. This begins to tie performativity (Butler, 1993) into materiality and lived embodied experiences and how these shape subjectivity. Bringing this into the context of gender, I deem meaningful differentiation to be (un)intentional iterative acts of distinguishing oneself that break gender norms (Simmel, 1957). This can be achieved through (un)intentionally actively and/or passively redoing or undoing gender (order) through power-to or power-with, which I emphasize in calling it “meaningful.” That is, meaningful differentiation has consequences for what is (im)possible concerning gender subjectification.

Redoing and undoing gender are contributions that build upon earlier challenges to West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of doing gender. Risman (2009) offered a critique that has guided my thinking. Namely, the way "doing gender" has been used in research is insufficient; we need to push for moving beyond doing gender. Risman (2009) argues that simply observing or describing how people conform to gender norms ("doing gender") does not contribute to feminist theory or social change—we need to look closer at undoing gender. The concept of undoing gender was first introduced by Butler (2004), without reference to West and Zimmerman (2009). However, Deutsch (2007) has also helped to put undoing gender on the theoretical map, defining it as social interactions that reduce gender differences. West and Zimmerman (2009) argue, however, that gender is always performed; there is, from their perspective, no undoing gender—only redoing it. Björk (2015) provides a concise definition of West and Zimmerman's (2009) redoing, writing that it "is used to signify when gendered norms change, producing new forms of masculinities and femininities, while gender accountability persists, as well as gendered power relations" (p. 22). In putting forth this definition, West and Zimmerman (2009) pose an important question: "Why quibble over terminology?" (p. 119). My answer is similar to theirs: because the concepts we use are the tools we bring to analysis, they shape our approach to our research materials and what we come to make of them. Based on this debate, I have, consequently, shaped the concepts of undoing and redoing gender in alignment with my research material and my analyses of power relations, power dynamics, and agency. This means I have adapted the concepts further to fit this endeavor.

When I say "redoing" gender, I mean that this "doing" of gender partially challenges the facets of heteronormativity, making it comparable to Butler's (1990) resignification. When I say "undoing" gender, I mean that this "doing" fully challenges all aspects of heteronormativity and is comparable to Butler's (1993, 2004) subversion. I have not used the concepts of resignification and subversion because I want to emphasize that this is a process that is more than discursive—it is lived, embodied, material. From this understanding, meaningful differentiation, or *not* doing gender "correctly," is where the potential for changing the gender order lies (Butler, 2004). This is why I explicitly connect my definitions to heteronormativity. Meaning that I do not view norms as deterministic, and instead highlight human agency, aligning with Allen's (1999) power-to and power-with perspectives. Meaningful differentiation can manifest (dis)comfort. When it incites discomfort, it can give way to opposition characterised by power-over through active and/or passive tendencies to avoid, prevent, and hinder redoing or undoing gender (order). For this reason, my understanding is that for a person to sustain meaningful differentiation, they must feel comfortable.

In emphasizing the doing, redoing, and undoing of gender, I want to clarify that my understanding is not imbued with anti-biologism. For instance, I do not mean to say that my theoretical foundation is built on the idea that the anatomical body (such as penises, testicles, vaginas, and uteruses) and its secretions or excretions (such as hormones, sperm, and breast milk) are not *real*. These biological markers *are* real. They are so real that they can trigger, for instance, gender dysphoria (Bremer, 2013). However, biological markers

are not the sole “parts” that give meaning to gender. Those mentioned above are not even the only types of “gendered” human biological markers observed. For instance, intersex people are born with bodily differences and cannot be assigned to (de Beauvoir, 1949) a binary gender category like male or female (Butler, 2004). These include people who, for instance, have either additional sex chromosomes, genitalia that is neither a penis nor a vagina, or external genitalia that does not “match” the internal sexual reproductive system (Pascoe & Bridges, 2016, p. 5). Social constructedness implies that gender is not then reducible to or determined by the material biological body. That is, gender does not depend on being born with certain body parts. The material body is met with preconceived ideas held by many, namely hegemonic norms, which I view as a primary mechanism in how we become, as we come to know through being (de Beauvoir, 1949; Barad, 2007). For this research, this means that materiality is important, but not a solitary driver in the social construction of gender.

A primary way that gender structures who we are and what we do is the idea that we tend to want to make ourselves intelligible to others in our contexts (Butler, 2004). For instance, by doing gender in expected ways (Butler, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This is what I see as making redoing and undoing gender deviant. That is, deviance becomes visible when people go against the norm. Deviating consequently catalyzes accountability through, for instance, punishments such as threats, policing, and being othered (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Schilt, 2006). I see these punishments as forms of opposition (Verloo, 2018a), indicating discomfort that arises when norms are broken and made visible (Ahmed, 2004). It is through opposition that bodies are policed into spaces shaped by particular histories and norms, which provides a sense of comfort (Ahmed, 2004). However, there is always the possibility of making “mistakes”, consciously or unconsciously, which can be understood as so-called shifts in the interpretation and embodiment of gender norms (Schilt, 2006). By refusing to conform to heteronormative expectations, it is possible to open up to new possibilities, again indicating that norms are not deterministic. Taken together, I see gender as a structure and an everyday practice, as both material and discursive, relational and embodied, and always lived through experience. This is co-constitution. It is through these different ways that the gender binary is done, redone, and undone. It is both between binary gender categories and between binary gender categories and any categories that deviate that gender inequalities take form.

## Doing Gender (In)equalities: (Post-/Anti-)Feminism and Anti-Genderism

Gender inequality is fundamentally about gendered domination and subordination caused by power asymmetries that manifest in power relations and are dispersed through deep structures. Gender inequality occurs anytime or anywhere there is sexism, sexist exploitation, that is to say gendered subordination (hooks, 2000, p. xi). However, it is more than that; gender inequality is systemic, ambiguous, complex, and conflictual—it is a wicked

problem (Eden & Wagstaff, 2021). My intention in this section is to demonstrate my primary assumptions about gender (in)equality *and* how I use feminist theories as tools for my research. I will argue that thinking with gender inequalities and feminist theories in mind has made it possible to analyze gendered problems in *plural* (Lorber, 2012; Rönnblom, 2011). These arguments are rooted in one of my primary assumptions — that all feminist theories share a common stance: gender matters and gendered domination and subordination need to be addressed (Lorber, 2012). In this sense, I understand the agreement across feminist theories as rooted in an epistemic community (Abbott et al., 2005). The differences, nonetheless, illustrate that feminist theory is not monolithic, emphasizing situated knowledges of gendered (in)equalities (Haraway, 1988).

Feminist theories both shape and are shaped by feminist movements for gender equality, which, in turn, catalyze scientific inquiry and facilitate feminist politics (Lorber, 2012). This, however, does not suggest a linear process, as feminist movements, theories, and politics are situated, dynamic, entangled, and continuously evolving over both time and space through engagement (Haraway, 1988). Gender equality is an essentially contested concept because it can be imagined in so many different ways (Gallie, 1956; Liinasson, 2017). That is, in constructing a variety of gender inequalities rooted in material and semiotic, relational and embodied, and lived experiences, gender *equalities* are imagined. They can be imagined discursively in policies, for instance, like the gender equality mandate; they can be imagined by doing in practice, by planning and doing gender equality work. Gender equalities can be lived and experienced when we are able to draw on power-to and power-with to shift power asymmetries. I consequently understand gender equality as a doing rather than something that is (Rönnblom, 2011). At the core of all the doing are people. And, consequently, I find it analytically productive to ground my understanding in the assumption that feminist theories, like the feminist movement and politics, facilitate people's resistance as an (un)intentional and (un)informed activity that challenges deep structures organized by power relations with the gender order at the center of focus.

I put gender equality to work as an empty signifier, a signifier without being signified (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Rönnblom, 2011), which is then filled with meaning, thereby delineating the (im)possibilities for interpretation and practice. This means that gender equality takes on many different, often contradictory, meanings and doings rooted in situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) and lived experiences (Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 2000), which support and are supported by empirical research. In line with Nygren et al. (2018), I also see gender equality as a floating node (Žižek, 1989) with powerful and often contradictory meanings that change over time and space. These understandings are sharp tools that enable me to analyze, as Nygren et al. (2018) write, “affective messiness,” or the various and competing ways of doing gender equality. Importantly, as Rönnblom (2011) argues, these types of tools highlight the divergent approaches across feminist theories to gender equality, emphasizing how it is shaped through power relations and imparting different meanings that can conflict across various actors (p. 37). As Gannon and Davies (2007) write, there are many feminisms, “and we need, at times, to deploy them all” (p. 100).

To paraphrase Tong and Botts (2024), feminist theories resist neat, seamless categorization. However, due to their long history and relatively stable traditions, feminist theories can be categorized into relatively distinct groups. The way lines are drawn between these theories is always subject to change, incomplete, and contestable (Tong, 2009; Lorber, 2012). These borders are valuable since they facilitate multi-theoretical analyses with and comparative analyses between feminist theoretical understandings of gender (in)equalities. In adopting a relational power perspective, however, gender equality as an empty and floating signifier does not mean that “anything goes.” Even feminist theories are shaped within power relations. So, I have “deployed [most of] them” (Gannon & Davis, 2007, p. 100) to determine if some theories become more dominant than others through, for instance, policy. I have done this by asking myself questions during analysis that align with my research aim and questions’ focus on power, including: Who is the final arbiter of “the” truth about gender inequality? Who benefits from this or that theory? How does x feminist theory undermine y feminist theory?

To analyze gender equality, I have primarily relied on Lorber’s framing of reformist, resistant, and rebellious feminist theories. Gender reform feminist theories—Liberal, Marxist, Socialist, and Transnational (i.e. Postcolonial or Decolonial) Feminism—address unequal gendered labor division, devaluation of women’s work, and underrepresentation in societal institutions, particularly in politics and law (Lorber, 2012, p. 7). Gender resistance feminist theories, including Radical, Lesbian, Psychoanalytic, and Cultural, and Standpoint Feminism, focus on patriarchy, or men’s domination as a systemic subordination of women, viewing it as a network of interlinked exploitations of women’s bodies, labor, and emotions (Lorber, 2012). Gender rebellion feminist theories, such as Social Construction, Multiracial/Multiethnic Feminism (for instance, Black feminism), Feminist Studies of Men, and Postmodern and Queer Feminism, highlight gender equality as shaped by social construction and maintenance of gendered orders through individual interactions and intersectional cultural productions (Lorber, 2012). In deploying Lorber’s perspective, some feminist perspectives appear to be unconsidered. For instance, ecofeminism and new materialist feminism. This, however, is not the case. My engagement with the research material has led me to choose Lorber’s perspective. I began this research in an inductive manner, open to the possibility of needing more perspectives, and, during analysis, thinking with other perspectives. Still, I found that Lorber’s framework provides a strong foundation for understanding the research as a whole and a lens for analyzing research material in this dissertation.

To further extend this understanding beyond resistance, I need to address how opposition fits into this part of my framework. Gender equalities are productively understood as defined through feminist theories, but they can be filled with meaning based on various perspectives that aim to maintain gender *ine*qualities, too. That is, gender equality can be shaped by meanings that do not define gender equality, but rather attempt to undermine, hinder, or stop it in various ways (Verloo, 2018). I have connected opposition to power-over in order to emphasize its connections to power relations and its enactment through power dynamics (Allen, 1999). This approach differs from that of oppositional

dynamics (Verloo & Paternotte, 2018), which I see as focusing on positionings and actions between actors. As Verloo and Paternotte (2018) suggest, it is important to shift away from a so-called “us vs. them thinking” (p. 3). By focusing on power dynamics rooted in power relations, I analyze which doings reproduce dominance rather than only the particular actors who do them. This is important since not all opposition is intentional. Seen in the context of deep structures, these actions do not simply define who people are. However, they can point to their internalization of power relations (Butler, 1997) and/or their (un)knowing acknowledgement of benefiting from them. The motivations for opposition are connected to its various forms, for instance, passive or active (Verloo, 2018). Whereas passive forms are more implicit, silent, and can easily be interpreted in different ways, active forms are explicit and conflict-oriented (Verloo, 2018). I (broadly) focus on post-feminist, anti-feminist, and anti-gender opposition. I frame post-feminist opposition as both expressions and actions that express appreciation for feminist accomplishments, while simultaneously expressing that feminism is no longer necessary (Messner, 2016). Relatedly, I see anti-feminism opposition as arguing and acting against feminist gains and goals. And, anti-gender opposition argues and acts against “gender” or “gender theory” as a societal threat to traditional values and institutions, often framing them as “gender ideology” (Kováts, 2016, p. 176).

## Gender (In)equalities of (Paid) Care Work and Gendered Organizations

Building on the idea that different feminist theories offer various understandings of gender inequalities, my intention in this section is to demonstrate how my research is grounded in the perspective that work is central to society and serves as a key driver of social stratification, including gender (in)equalities (Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2012; Weeks, 2011). Given my focus on preschool teachers and the arguments presented in Chapters Two and Three, I ground my thinking about their work in the gendered division of labor more broadly and a segregated labor market more specifically. I relate the gendered division of labor to how deep structures assign and value all forms of work, paid and unpaid, along gendered lines. This is how some work becomes “women’s work.” Specifically, work is gendered because power relations, including the gender order, shape power asymmetries with and through it that compel women into work that requires nurturing and emotions. I see the connection between women and this work as naturalized through reproductive abilities, motherhood, and women’s historical connections to care. My understanding, based on this framing, is that women’s work is a way of sustaining men’s dominance and power-over. Because women are expected to do this work, men are expected to do work outside of the feminized “sphere” innate to women.

I view the gender-segregated labor market as one manifestation of the gendered division of labor that is explicitly focused on the organization of paid work. The gendered division of labor is the systematic distribution of individuals across different paid work

organized according to their gender, intersecting with factors such as race and class (Davis, 1981). These intersections are important because the meanings, conditions, and valuations of work vary greatly within gendered groups based, for instance, on race and class (Davis, 1981). As a result, I do not see women's work as a universal category. For example, as I argued in Chapter Two, while middle-class feminists fought to be free from the home, working-class women had long been obligated to work for pay to survive. This is an essential insight that has guided my understanding of preschool teachers' knowledges as situated and shaped through their work.

A key assumption in my analysis is that work organizations both reinforce and have the potential to challenge the gender-segregated labor market. As women are concentrated into specific types of work, these work organizations become gendered along the lines of race and class (Acker, 1999; Connell, 2006; Davis, 1981). I consequently analyze preschool teachers' knowledges of the gender equality mandate and their practices of gender equality work as situated within a public sector, gendered organizations in Swedish preschools (Connell, 2006). From this perspective, organizations are sites where the broader gender order, in intersection with class and race, in society is enacted, (re)produced, negotiated, challenged, and sometimes undone within a local gender regime or broader power relations (Acker, 1990; Butler, 2004; Connell, 2006; Davis, 1981; McDonald, 2016). In a slight tweak of Connell's (2006) definition, I refer to gender regime as the overall pattern of power relations within the gender order, enacted through power dynamics within an organization.

A primary assumption of mine underlying this research is that the professionalization of women's work has been an *attempt* to challenge the gender order by negotiating gender norms. I understand professionalization as a process rooted in strategies including closure, ethical requirements, and the monopolization of knowledge (Berntsson, 2016; Witz, 1990). I deploy the understanding that professionalization is based on the assumption that the 'ideal worker' is modeled on a male norm (Witz, 1990). I see this as underpinning tensions between occupational professionalism and organizational professionalism that preschool teachers must navigate, reproduce, or resist (Acker, 1990; Evetts, 2011). In this, I assume that professionalization is not a gender neutral process (Witz, 1990). I understand professionalization as a professional project that depends on, rather than challenges, the gender order (Witz, 1990).

I frame preschool teacher's work as an occupational professional project. I understand this as a process rooted in strategies of closure, ethical requirements, and the monopolization of knowledge (Berntsson, 2006; Witz, 1990). And it is in this light that I view shifts in preschool organizations from a flat to a more hierarchical structure, marked by particular professional responsibilities, requirements for longer education rooted in science, preschool teacher certification, and occupational ethics. And so, while my understanding is that preschool teachers are expected to do care *and* educational work, these strategies and distinctions create divisions in labor within the gendered organization and other groups of, primarily, women. This understanding shapes my focus on the gendered,

classed, and racialized divisions created by the process of professionalization. This attunement has been useful in analyses related to the political consequences of preschool teachers' situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988; Mouffe, 2005).

I am deeply influenced by Ulfsdotter Eriksson's (2012) problematization of an explicit focus on professions rather than occupations within sociology. Namely, inspired by Krause (1971), she drew my attention to the importance of framing low-paid and low-status work within the sociology of occupations rather than the sociology of professions. This framing of preschool teachers is one of the main anchors in my analysis, based on the assumption that the ability to impact society lies not in whether the work is a profession or not, nor in the pay or status, because these maintain the gender order through power-over. I view power-to and power-with as characterizing features of power that can be enacted to challenge asymmetries perpetuated through the deep structural order and change the (im)possibilities for the preschool teaching occupation.

## Doing Gender Equality Work in Preschools

I define gender equality work as efforts to eliminate gender inequalities (Amundsdotter et al., 2015). In the context of the preschool, I see gender equality work as partly done through pedagogy, which I define as “the observable act of teaching together with its attendant discourse of educational theories, values, evidence, and justifications” (Alexander, 2009, p. 927). This means that I see pedagogy, in line with Freire's (1970) arguments, as a political practice that is neither developed nor done in an apolitical vacuum or without having political consequences. Teaching in this sense has the potential to create “a radical space of possibility” (hooks, 1994, p. 12). For gender equality work, this can be done through a variety of pedagogies, including gender pedagogy, gender equality pedagogy, norm-critical pedagogy, queer pedagogy, and feminist pedagogy—all of which align with different theories of feminism (Lenz Taguchi, 2016; Lorber, 2012). *However*, a sole focus on the pedagogy of gender equality work limits analytical opportunities to a primary focus on preschool teachers' teaching and children's learning outcomes. This is especially the case if pedagogy is not explicitly connected to the political (Mouffe, 2005) and only analyzed in the context of the learning space as an “observable act” (Alexander, 2009, p. 927) between a (preschool) teacher and a learner. As a result, I depend on theory that goes beyond the pedagogization of gender equality work (Axelsson & Frödén, 2021). That is, I have shifted the theoretical scope in my dissertation to analyze the feminist sociological aspects of gender equality work in the preschool.

My feminist sociological focus on gender equality work is grounded in the preschool as a public sector work organization (Axelsson & Frödén, 2021; Connell, 2006; Heikkilä, 2020). But, not any old public sector work organization, the preschool is, as I have argued, gendered (Connell, 2006). I see this distinction as connected to gender equality work as a process constrained by the documents of the gender equality mandate, which become

organizational discourse (Ball, 1993) through interactions between workers and the documents. This understanding is summarized by Ahmed (2007):

Documents also circulate within organizations, creating vertical and horizontal lines of communication. So, if documents help to create organizations, their work does not stop there: we can also analyse what documents do within organizations, considering where they do (or do not) go, and how they do (or do not) get taken up (p. 591).

From this perspective, the gender equality mandate contributes to shaping the gendered public sector work organizations by creating “vertical lines” or hierarchies between those doing the work (Ball, 1993). This frames preschool teachers as leaders in this work, expected to guide the processes linking documents and discourse to make them practice, lived, material, and embodied. Accordingly, I view preschool teachers’ role in gender equality work as making them more than care workers and educators—they are expected to become change agents (Amundsdotter et al., 2015). This is because these documents delineate socio-political problems (Bacchi, 2009; Verloo, 2005; Walby, 2005) that preschool teachers play a key role in solving.

Building on Amundsdotter et al.’s (2015) thinking about change agents *within* organizations, I see gender equality work in preschools as capable of changing more than the local gender regime (Connell, 2006). That is, making gender equality work possible means that the gender regime could *challenge* the gender order (Connell, 2006). This is because gender equality work in the context of the preschool seeps out of the gendered organization into society since it is meant to challenge the way gender structures our identities through our everyday doings (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 2004). At its core, in line with the potential of gender mainstreaming, I see this work as able to shape the (im)possibilities of the youngest children in the school system (Walby, 2005). Preschools are public sector organizations, and gender equality work is public work because it is mandated and carried out by a tax-funded institution for the youngest children in society, whose very becoming is the subject of debate on agency, whether they are (a)political, whether their identities are biological or socially constructed, et cetera. As Reimers and Plymoth (2021) put it, the preschool has historically been, and I frame it as remaining, an institution designed to promote societal change, as I showed in Chapters Two and Three. This is key to my framing of the Swedish preschool as one of the first arenas for gender (in)equality, opposition, and resistance.

The constructions in the gender mandate and the doing of gender equality work have political significance (Bacchi, 2009; Rönnblom, 2011; Verloo, 2005; Walby, 2005). I see the gender equality mandate, in the Swedish context, as a result of feminist politics motivated by feminist activists and movement *and* Swedish exceptionalist incentives. It has its origins in the political and in politics (Mouffe, 2005). For this reason, I have re-framed the gender equality mandate as part of Sweden’s gender mainstreaming strategy, which is accordingly put to work in my dissertation as a policy constellation required under Swedish Law. This mandate exists in a context of the “self-evident gender equality political

project” (Rönblom, 2011, p. 36). However, the gender equality mandate is open for interpretation, which is often approached theoretically as what gender equality “is” (Rönblom, 2011). Since I approach the concept of gender equality as multifaceted, with varying meanings depending on the relationships between all individuals and entities involved, I see them as shaped by deep structures that perpetuate power relations (Allen, 1999). I have, however, framed the gender equality mandate as problematizing which gender inequalities should be eliminated (Ball, 1993), by creating possibilities for certain forms of change while excluding others (Rönblom, 2011; Verloo, 2005; Walby, 2005). Consequently, I frame gender equality, not as something that is, but as a “doing” and a floating and empty signifier in this context, in highlighting the way the gender equality problems might be interpreted in different, contradictory, productive ways across time and space (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Rönblom, 2011; Žižek, 1989). This complicates the meaning of change agent. That is, drawing on situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988), my understanding is that the gender equality mandate can be “taken up” in various ways across different preschools, as well as within them, among preschool staff (Ahmed, 2007, p. 591).

My understanding is that neoliberal logics root the interpretation of the gender equality mandate and the doing of gender equality work in relation to the professionalization of the preschool teacher occupation. Key to my analysis is understanding how these processes disrupt the political roots of feminist politics through depoliticization, making gender equality work into an administrative routine limited to practical pedagogical methods, removing the power analysis (Rönblom, 2011). For this research, this means I view gender equality work, approached as gender mainstreaming, through new public management strategies, which are characterized by buy-and-sell systems, making politicians contractors of both public and private providers, and citizens the customers (Rönblom, 2011). For this research, I take this to mean that other people who do not work in the gendered public sector organizations of preschools have the potential to influence how the gender equality mandate is interpreted and done in practice. As I see it, this has political consequences (Mouffe, 2005).

In my feminist sociological pursuits, I am guided by the words of sociologist Ken-Hou Lin (lecture at University of Texas at Austin, 2014), which I have carried with me since my undergraduate studies. He said: “The main question that sociology asks is: who benefits?” The question of who benefits has been a valuable tool for me in understanding sociological phenomena at different levels of analysis. In this research, it is at the core of my overarching problematizations. It remains in focus across my analyses of the gender equality mandate, preschool teachers’ knowledges on the gender equality mandate and work, and all humans and non-human entities shaping gender equality work. In other words, this question serves as the foundation for all my research questions and the crux of my analysis, which is informed by a power perspective. The (im)possibilities of achieving gender equality create tensions between resistance and opposition, thereby exposing the power relations that engulf preschool teachers in their roles as care workers, educators, and change agents (Amundsdotter et al., 2015). This means that engaging with the gender equality mandate or undertaking gender equality work can (un)intentionally challenge or

reproduce power relations by participating in power dynamics. Those who do this work are part of shaping the field of possibilities for gender (in)equality.

## Chapter Four Implications

In Chapter Four, I have woven the general theoretical strings that tie the articles included in this dissertation together. I have demonstrated how theory is not merely a background understanding, but tools I have put to work in this dissertation, making it possible to analyze the (im)possibilities of preschool teachers' relational power in doing gender equality work. By engaging closely with the empirical research material, I have refined, extended, and at times challenged the very theories I draw upon. In this way, I put theory to work as both a lens and a practice: it orients, disrupts, and generates possibilities for my thinking during the analysis of the research material. The "red thread" tying the four articles together is therefore not a single theoretical claim, but rather my ongoing conversation between theory and the research material generated in this dissertation. This conversation is part of what makes it possible to critically explore the (im)possibilities of gender equality in Swedish preschools. Together, these theories lay the groundwork for the methodology I have put to work in this dissertation, which I will address in the next chapter.

The four articles in this dissertation focus on different empirical phenomena related to the critical exploration of preschool teachers' relational power in shaping the (im)possibilities of gender equality work in Sweden. I have subsequently employed multiple qualitative methods, including critical policy analysis, semi-structured interviews, research subject interviews, participant observation, and reflexive thematic analysis. I describe and motivate the specific methods in detail in each article. In this chapter, I aim to discuss how the combination of these methods forms my qualitative methodology for this larger research project, which specifically aims to critically explore how power relations shape the (im)possibilities of gender equality work in Swedish preschools and how preschool teachers navigate power dynamics in their everyday practices. In the remainder of this chapter, I begin by mapping out the research design. Then, I argue that my qualitative methodology, or system of methods, is tied together through my critical feminist ethnographic approach. The methods work together across different registers: critical policy analysis was put to work in discursive-structural terrains; semi-structured interviews facilitated understanding of how preschool teachers navigate them; research subject interviewing troubled researcher-led norms; participant observation drew these elements together in practice. In light of this approach, which highlights the researcher as the primary research tool, I address my situatedness before motivating these specific methods. This is because the motivation of the methods should be read through the assumption that these choices would not have been the same if I were not the researcher. Following this, I show how iterative movement between the methods is a methodological enactment of my critical feminist ethnography: a design that refuses a single vantage point, instead constructing knowledge relationally in various ways.

### Mapping Out the Research Design

My research methodology is designed “by standing on the shoulders of giants,” to use Isaac Newton’s famous words. This means it is fundamentally rooted in long-established traditions in scientific methods. And so, I want to take this opportunity to note that, although some who have come into contact with my research insist that I call it post-qualitative inquiry, it is not so; I do not reject any pre-existing research methodology (St. Pierre, 2021). *However*, I do depart from normative masculinist logics embedded in the scientific method—this is not “science as usual” (Harding, 1991, p. 1). The research is resultantly designed in close conversation with the giants of *feminist* methodologies. And when I have felt a sense of lack, I have considered the aims, questions, and theories that ground this research, which, as it turns out, has led to some innovation. This means that my research

design is not a knee-jerk reaction, but rather a carefully considered approach. The research is designed with intention.

I employ qualitative methodology, using methods including semi-structured interviews, research subject inter-views, participant observation, and critical policy analysis. This methodology is suitable for this dissertation because the questions and aims generate interpretive and non-numerical research material. Together, the different methods generate layers of empirical material over time and across different levels of analysis. With that said, qualitative methodologies have shortcomings. For instance, they are often employed to gain deeper insight into the self-understandings and lived experiences of politically marginalized individuals, in order to avoid the reproduction of such marginalization. However, the representation often used in this methodology can lead some researchers to confuse objectification with ‘good science.’ (Compton, Meadow, and Schilt, 2018). The problem of objectification is that it turns agentic subjects into theoretical objects, leading to a practice of othering and the creation of “us” and “them” (Compton, Meadow, and Schilt, 2018). This violence causes alienation between research subjects and the researcher (Anzaldúa, 1987). Since this is feminist qualitative research, I have aimed for it to do more than simply “add women [or those who do women’s work] and stir” (Dharmapuri, 2011). My stance aligns with Lorber (2012), who argues, “It is not enough to just add women subjects to research designs; questions have to be asked from critical feminist perspectives, we have to include women’s voices, and analysis has to reflect the viewpoints of those who have been marginalized and silenced” (p. 15). This is a shift from research *on* people who do women’s work to research *with* people who do women’s work. It has been essential to ground my methodology in this consideration.

The qualitative methodology in this dissertation does not wander aimlessly across the variety of qualitative methods. I have rooted the semi-structured interviews, research subject inter-views, participant observations, and critical policy analysis in critical exploration. Duckworth (2005) describes critical exploration as a process of deeply investigating ideas, questioning assumptions, and constructing meaning through inquiry. While her work focuses on education, it has influenced qualitative methodology, emphasizing open-ended exploration and critical questioning. And so, when I say ‘critical,’ I mean the focus on and questioning of power throughout the compilation. Choosing critical exploration centers the researcher as the mediator in questioning power, in order to highlight (im)possibilities for emancipation in an exploratory manner. When I say ‘exploration,’ I emphasize investigation and analysis conducted with curiosity, openness, and an attempt to strike a balance between skepticism and optimism. For this reason, I have approached this research in an abductive manner, moving dynamically and iteratively between theory, material creation, and analysis to arrive at the best possible explanation based on my situated knowledge, which has been vetted and challenged by my academic peers in various forms.

## Critical Feminist Ethnographic Approach

I use a critical feminist ethnographic approach to my qualitative methodology. This weaves together the elements of critical and feminist ethnography, emphasizing power as it relates to gendered inequalities. Research results are the manifestation of thousands of decisions made across a range of entangled processes, and an approach within the broad and growing qualitative methodologies is a stabilizing tool. It gives a foundation. Therefore, I must clarify that this is not a conventional ethnography. Instead, here the ethnographic *approach* is not exclusively defined by the researcher as an ethnographer, by traditional ethnographic methods, or by the product of a large monograph called an ethnography. An ethnographic approach is a type of intellectual effort (Rooke, 2010). In line with the anthropological roots of ethnography, this approach frames my understanding of fieldwork as something constructed between the culture of interest and the researcher. While in the field, in line with Rooke (2010), I see this approach as centered on “the way that people make sense of the understandings available to them. It is a way of grounding theoretical comprehension in a located social context” (p. 27), facilitating the construction of participants’ lived experiences in a specific time and location (Rooke, 2010).

With my theoretical framework, an ethnographic approach facilitates the discovery of partial and incomplete truths (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Geertz (1994) describes the intellectual effort of ethnography as being related to the interpretive writing strategy of thick description. This is ingrained in how I write not only *what* people do, descriptively, but also *how* and *why*, including the layers of meaning that make the act sociologically significant. I see this way of writing as binding the power dynamics of everyday practices (gestures, words, routines) to power relations (norms, values, culture). Along with Valocchi (2005), I see an ethnographic approach as the most useful way to critically explore gendered understandings because it relies on social engagements that invite complexity, making way for what Butler (1990) calls a descriptive account of gendered understandings, which ultimately is a critical inquiry into its conditions of possibility (p. xxii).

In line with the project of qualitative research, a critical feminist ethnographic approach emphasizes the role of the researcher, making it essential for me to clarify the ethnographic devices I rely on. Through my use of semi-structured interviews, research subject interviews, and participant observation, I have relied heavily on my different social, sensory, emotional, and embodied involvements, which make the critical feminist ethnographic approach processual a doing (Graham, 2010). This means keeping all my senses open (watching, listening, feeling, etc.), but also remaining present and social—trying to show my genuine interest and curiosity, and, of course, respect for all participants—staying human. These involvements are characterized by what Haraway (1997) has called an ethnographic attitude, which she defines as a mode of practical and theoretical attention by remaining mindful and accountable. This is why the critical feminist ethnographic approach encompasses critical policy analysis and my engagement with other planning and documentation documents, including photographs. And, this is something

Haraway (1997) emphasizes: this attitude can be useful beyond human-to-human engagements. For me, this means keeping an openness to the experiences of the research process by going with the flow, while remaining grounded in the relationship between theory and practice. More than a mode of attention, an ethnographic attitude is characterized by an openness to interactions and viewing research as a collective undertaking (Haraway, 1997, p. 191). This means I have aimed to be attuned to the preschool teacher participants as co-creators.

Research participants are co-creators of knowledge (Kvale, 1996). I do not mean that this is action research, which I see as more of an intervention—and more comparable to an experiment: Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect (Nazari, 2022). Rather, as Kvale (1996) puts it, I see my interactions with participants as a “construction site of knowledge” (p. 2). For instance, I designed interview situations so that preschool teachers could steer the discussion in different directions; participant observations were determined relationally according to what they wanted me to participate in; and they took many of the photos and chose the documents to provide for me. They have access to their own research materials. And, I have discussed their interviews and observations with them. For instance, we discussed questions and answers from the early phases of interviewing later. Moreover, I have invited them “behind the scenes” to seminars where the research has been presented and publicly reviewed, and even to lectures I have given on gender or norm critical pedagogy. These opportunities have also led them to provide feedback on the research.

However, I approach these engagements with caution. Stacey (1988) importantly emphasizes the irony that this type of approach poses a greater risk for the exploitation, betrayal, and abandonment of research subjects by the researcher than a positivist approach, due to the closeness between researcher and participant. I take this critique very seriously. It has helped me to see the normative and sometimes performative enactments of feminist researchers. It has also helped me identify the amorous affinity between feminist theories and the ethnographic approach, which stems from common epistemological assumptions (Valocchi, 2005). This means that I have followed participants’ lead. I am, consequently, not in close contact with all of the preschool teachers who participated in this research. However, I have emphasized to every participant that I will remain available to them for any matters related to gender equality work in preschools. Some of them have taken me up on this, and I have, for instance, given presentations on gender equality work in preschools at the request of participants. This calls for another ethnographic device, namely, to be upfront about my enactments of power and positionality, as I do in the next section.

## Situating the Research/er

I work from the perspective that research is not an objective, neutral way of observing the world as it exists, intended to reveal “the truth” or “discover” reality. I do not see the researcher as someone who collects data as if it were already “out there” for the taking.

Instead, my understanding is that researchers generate experience-based material within the specific context of their research with other people and things. As Rönnblom (2011) puts it, inspired by Mol's concept of ontological politics, "the researcher creates the reality she researches and this reality has political implications" (p. 37). This is why I consider it essential to communicate my situatedness before delving into the methods I use across the four articles. I am situating myself the research/er to show you where my choices are rooted. I am the person who has chosen these methods, and I want to make it clear that I can only 'see' from my position that is materially discursively located in a particular time, space, embodied and lived within specific and historical power relations. In acknowledging this, I contend that my situated, partial, and embodied knowledge (Haraway, 1988) plays a crucial role in shaping the knowledge produced through this research, particularly through the methods I have chosen. Like all researchers, I do this from a "non-innocent somewhere" (Lykke, 2010, p. 4), and I have an ethical obligation to be transparent about that location.

Well, I Ain't In Texas Anymore...

One of the parents of a child who participated in this research asked me, "How does a woman from Texas become interested in gender equality work in Swedish preschools?" Growing up in Texas as a mixed-race Hispanic girl meant developing a sociological imagination at a very early age (Mills, 1959). That is, a form of self-consciousness highlighting the connection between personal experiences and larger social structures (Mills, 1959). This positionality facilitated my early understanding that the personal is political, a central assumption I carry into this research. Anzaldúa (1987) puts the feeling into words, "When we're up against the wall, when we have all sorts of oppressions coming at us, we are forced to develop this faculty so that we will know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away (p. 38-39). These experiences shape my ethnographic approach by attuning me to boundary work in positional negotiations, whether explicit or implicit, all of which are core to analyzing power relations and dynamics.

As a mixed-race person, the material embodiment of the colonizer and colonized, my body has often been framed as "strange," not fitting neatly into existing racialized structures (this is similar to other mixed-race scholars, see Ahmed, 2017). In Texas, I embody a disruption of racial categories, challenging the boundaries of national and cultural belonging. This position, along with coming from a family of second-generation Americans and first-generation university-educated parents, made living in a newly middle-class family feel strained compared to my white upper-class peers, leading to recurrent othering. However, my proximity to whiteness privileged me in many contexts. For instance, with many Mexican-Americans calling me "güera" (a word indicating how white I look in relation to them, deeply rooted in colorism) and placing their hands over me to protect me from *mal de ojo* (the evil eye). Experiencing this othering by individuals and large social groups has made me more aware of how power relations can privilege and subordinate the same person. Methodologically, this led me to want to change the research

situations with participants by shifting contexts across space and time while maintaining a focus on gender equality work.

After moving to Sweden over a decade ago, I started working at a preschool as an assistant to a neurodivergent child. It became clear that Sweden shares many similarities with Texas. Even here in Sweden, even in a preschool, I often observed classism, racism, and sexism. This is how the preschool became a very important place for me; this is why the people who work at preschools have become important people to me, and why I have done this research. However, whether or not I am an insider or an outsider in Sweden or in the preschool is a “loaded duality” (Haraway, 1997, p. 68). I experience it as more of a spectrum, depending on who identifies me. On the one hand, in Sweden, I have mostly felt that people do not see me as a space invader, even when they see me as an “outsider” (Puwar, 2004). On the other hand, during this research, some individuals working at the preschools (who did not participate in this study) explicitly stated that they were uncomfortable in my presence. Some participating preschool teachers also expressed discomfort, mainly during the initial phase of the interviews. I have related this to my role as a researcher because that is what people have told me. Generally, for instance, and in this research too, my experience has been that I tend to benefit from American privilege, which I have noticed in different ways. For instance, I am not always framed as an immigrant. Instead, many people, including some participants in this research, seem intrigued that I am American. I get questions like “Why would you want to come *here* when you can live *there*?” These interactions have shaped the construction of the field, granting me access to some people and ideas, while limiting others. This has, in turn, led me to actively seek to build rapport relationally over time through, for instance, early in-person interviews, research subject inter-views, and multiple feedback points. This has shaped what knowledge could be constructed between us.

### Anti-racist, LGBTQIA+-supporting, Decolonial, Post-humanist Feminist Killjoy

I am an anti-racist, LGBTQIA+-supporting, decolonial, post-humanist feminist. This is an activist positionality. Audre Lorde famously wrote, “Your silence will not protect you,” and I mostly agree. However, I have learned that this location carries the risk of being “bruised and misunderstood” (Lorde, 1977, p. 1). And so, as I speak up, I stand with Lorde (1977) when she writes, “of course I am afraid [...]—[I have a] fear of contempt, of censure, or judgment” (p. 3). Ahmed (2017) writes that you become a feminist killjoy when you get in the way. That is, when you are unwilling to go along with it or brush it off. I acknowledge that this positionality has led me to view this research as necessary. However, it has also meant that I have needed to prepare myself to feel discomfort, meet opposition, and open up to multiplicity throughout fieldwork. For instance, by thinking about how I listen, analyze, and behave in the field. This positionality has therefore made me aware that I cannot seek consensus, and that I need to remain open to understanding different ways of thinking and doing.

Critics have argued that activist researchers are biased and unscientific. Activist researchers, in rebuttal, have argued that no researcher could or should be understood as “detached,” “neutral,” “unbiased,” or “objective.” Amid the climate crisis, seeing scientists demonstrate has become an almost daily occurrence. But this is not a new trend. Albert Einstein was anti-war and anti-racist; he chose to be stateless in resistance to militarism. Charles Darwin was strongly opposed to animal cruelty and was involved in drafting a bill to prevent the use of animals in experiments. He and his wife, Emma, were also actively engaged in debates over the use of steel traps while hunting. Jane Goodall has been an activist on issues such as the climate crisis and biodiversity loss for decades. The list of activist scholars continues bell hooks, Rachel Carson, Martin Luther King Jr., and others. Research has even shown us that there is “an artificial boundary [...] between research and activism [...] scholar activism can be good for science and for society when it centers the needs of people who are multiply marginalized” (Causadias et al., 2024, p. 300). Rogers et al. (2024) argue that we need to stop likening “good” science to neutrality, objectivity, and universality and start practicing research as an act of resistance through working from humanizing epistemologies, listening and learning from those who have been systematically excluded from science, and by recognizing resistance as normative and necessary. In methodological terms, this means that my methods are designed to be responsive, allowing me to be accountable and attentive to the research process rather than neutral and objective. This is, for instance, why research subject inter-viewing came to be (Rådesjö, 2025a).

My research education and toolkit have been shaped by numerous books, courses, and various universities across different academic fields, as well as by a myriad of junior and senior academics who have read and engaged with my work through seminars and conferences. These experiences have also been influenced by my experiences outside the academic “bubble.” We researchers are human beings with our own baggage colored by our diverse experiences. *However*, we are humans who have spent many years developing and refining skills that facilitate scientific inquiry. This is done within a community of practice, guarded by gatekeepers who allow participation only when you are identified as a “real” researcher (Rådesjö, 2018). But even so, I am not detached from this research; I have done it because I *am* attached. As Sedgwick (1990) writes, “realistically, what brings me to this work can hardly be that I am a woman, or a feminist, but that I am this particular one” (p. 59). As the mediator of these research engagements, my positionality has led me to choose this topic, these questions, and to deploy these analyses. I *am* also the “tool” in this endeavor, given my ethnographic approach. In being aware of my ideologies and values, I can question them during the research process (Wojnicka & Nowicka, 2023). That is, rather than confirming my own beliefs, I see my work as a way of continually challenging them. With that, I must say that this research has shaped me just as much as I have shaped it.

# Research Material Creation and Analyzing Methods

In this section of the chapter, I motivate the methods used in this research. In the next chapter, I show how they are used in each article. However, for more depth, please see each of the individual articles. This table provides an overview of the methods used in each article.

| Methods                    | Article I | Article II | Article III | Article IV |
|----------------------------|-----------|------------|-------------|------------|
| Critical Policy Analysis   | X         |            |             |            |
| Semi-Structured Interviews |           | X          | X           | X          |
| RSI                        |           | X          | X           | X          |
| Participant Observations   |           |            | X           | X          |

Table 1. Overview of methods across articles in the dissertation

## Critical policy analysis

I have carried out a critical policy analysis of the Swedish Preschools’ gender equality mandate to explore its complexities and examine how power relations that constrain gender equality work in Swedish preschools. The critical policy analysis in this research depends on “diffraction, a qualitative method of analysis that involves conducting multiple theoretical readings upon a singular set of [material]” (Ulmer, 2016, p. 1382). This is not “pure” Baradian (2007) diffraction; it is diffraction according to Ulmer. I do not see this as a problem, since Barad has translated the concept of diffraction from physics to philosophy, giving it new meaning. Ulmer’s (2016) take on diffraction is a translation into critical policy analysis, connected to Barad’s (2007) and Haraway’s (1997) thinking, which enables an analytical focus on the effects of differences, interferences, interactions, and reinforcements generated by a multiplicity of resulting analyses. As a result, I see Ulmer’s (2016) translation as a practical method of analysis. Specifically, Ulmer’s (2016) process has enabled me to think with multiple theoretical readings of the gender equality mandate, through thirteen feminist theories, thereby increasing the number of analytical possibilities. Simply put, this is a way to view the gender equality mandate through various theoretical lenses to expand what can be seen. In practice, I was guided by my research questions as I read each gender mandate passage included in the analysis, using a non-exhaustive matrix of 13 feminist theories categorized by their specific problem orientations related to reform, resistance, and rebellion (Lorber, 2012). This, as Barad (2007) and Haraway (2007) suggest, should be the outcome, and it is apparent in my analysis, which focuses on the effects, interferences, reinforcements, interactions, and exclusions of the gender equality mandate problem constructions.

Diffraction, as Ulmer (2016) puts it, involves critical theories that inform the methodological process, feminist theories, and additional critical theories used to understand the research material. That is where Bacchi's (2009) approach comes in and shapes the methodological approach of the critical policy analysis, "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR). The WPR approach is based on a problem-questioning perspective rather than problem-solving in order to challenge problem formulation in policy (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2018). The primary advantage of this method is that it grounds analysis in interrogation of the (im)possibilities of problems, and how they contribute to shaping solutions, subjectivities, and objects (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2018). This is the core of my research aim and my overarching research questions. A constraint of diffraction, however, is that the six-question checklist that is typical of a WPR overcomplicates the analysis. I resultantly narrowed the focus and shaped my research questions based on Bacchi's first question (what is the problem represented to be?) and fourth question (what is left unproblematic in this problem representation?).

Another way I altered WPR was by removing the concept of "representation" in favor of "construction," resulting in what should actually be called: WPC. This is because representation focuses on how something is depicted or described, while construction highlights how something is socially created or formed. This change is better aligned with the theories I think with, for instance, those that say gender equality is a doing and a contested, empty, and floating signifier. A final way I changed Bacchi's approach was to replace the word "unproblematic" with "(im)possible," since "unproblematic" is only one of many (im)possibilities. Using these questions and the matrix of feminist theories, the themes were constructed through an iterative reading and coding process of the gender equality mandate, initially based on the constructional alignment with (a) particular feminist perspective(s) in the matrix. However, since Lorber (2012) is a secondary source on the actual work of feminist theorists, I relied on first-hand sources, many of which she cited, to add depth to the coding and theme-building. For instance, to locate particular concepts or debates.

## Fieldwork

The majority of the research material was co-constructed with preschool teachers participating in the field. Again, by co-constructed, I mainly mean that fieldwork is relational. The field itself is a co-construction: I arrive and define my interests; the preschool teachers and other preschool staff communicate where I may pursue my interests and who I may speak with, and under what circumstances. Then, we engage with each other, creating knowledge through the exchange of my questions and their answers, my focus and their actions, and my interests and their physical space. The 21 participants in this research differed in their participation across the four phases of fieldwork. In the first phase, all 21 preschool teachers participated; in the second, 14 of 21 preschool teachers participated; in the third, 10 of 21 preschool teachers participated, and in the final phase, 17 of 21 preschool teachers participated (See Table 2 in the next sub-section).

### *Locating Willing Participants*

| Methods                                      | Number of Participants | Duration          |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Semi-structured Inter-views (Phase 1)</b> | 21 preschool teachers  | ~ 1 hour each     |
| <b>RSI (Phase 2)</b>                         | 14 preschool teachers  | ~ 1 hour each     |
| <b>Participant Observation (Phase 3)</b>     | 10 preschool teachers  | 112 hours         |
| <b>Semi-Structured Inter-views (Phase 4)</b> | 17 preschool teachers  | ~ 30 minutes each |

*Table. 2 Overview of the Number of Participants included in each Research Phase and its Duration*

My efforts to locate preschool teacher participants were purposive, non-random, and strategic. I took this approach to ensure that two main criteria were fulfilled. First, since many large cities in Sweden are segregated along class, ethnic, and arguably racial lines (Tunström & Wang, 2019), I selected preschools based on their locations relative to these factors. In this sense, the focus was not on the social class, ethnicity, or race of preschool teachers, but rather on the neighborhoods surrounding the preschools and, by extension, the children attending them. It was essential to include preschool teachers who work in socially diverse environments to understand how this may or may not relate to the overarching aims and questions of this research. However, it became apparent only afterward that the preschool teachers in this research tended to be more ethnically diverse at preschools in areas with higher ethnic and racial diversity. Some of these preschools are in areas that have become notorious throughout Sweden, known for the high number of non-white and non-Swedish people living there. While conducting fieldwork, some of the preschool teachers working in these preschools expressed concern for me during my visits, for example, by offering to walk with me to the neighborhood square to buy falafel. I declined, but I expressed my gratitude for their offer. This is important to note because I think it reflects the relationality of the fieldwork, and how my identity and that of the preschool teachers shape it.

A second criterion that I wanted to fulfill was to include preschool teachers of different genders in this research. For this reason, I selected preschools based on whether they had male preschool teachers. I received help from an insider to find preschools with more gender diversity among the working preschool teachers. It became clear that men seemed to cluster at the preschools, meaning that there were multiple men working at a preschool and never just one. This also led me to locate a co-creator who is okay with being identified as a woman but ultimately is more gender fluid and also identifies as non-binary or they/them. Throughout the articles, I have referred to them as “she” in some cases to protect their confidentiality.

I found all the preschools included in this research to be aesthetically beautiful, many with large playgrounds and lush foliage. Some had planting boxes where they grew food and flowers, while others, in more urban locations, had large six-seater strollers for walking throughout the city. Some preschools were newly built or renovated, while others were located in large manors from the 1700s and 1800s. This greatly affected whether the classroom was a single large room or several small ones, with the new buildings being the former and the older buildings the latter. The classrooms were thoughtfully decorated. Some preschool teachers explained their intentions for incorporating old oil paintings, which they believed would create a beautiful and inspiring environment. While others conveyed their intention to hang posters at the children's level to increase their engagement. Some children at one preschool napped outside under a covered porch, others on plastic mats in a room with thick curtains. The preschools also varied in size, with some only having four classrooms and the largest having eight.

Access was officially established through the principals of the preschools. The circumstances were constrained because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, two preschool principals in Västra Götalands County gave me access. One, on the condition that I did not enter the preschool. The other, on the condition that I only visit the preschool when I am feeling healthy and not showing any symptoms of COVID-19. Six preschool teachers from these two participating preschools participated in this research after receiving verbal and written information on the research (See my informational letter to preschool principals and teachers in **Appendix One**). The remaining preschools and preschool teachers who participated in this research were located with the help of an insider, who put me in contact with five preschool principals in Halland and Skåne County. None of these principals cited any COVID-19-based conditions. Upon approval by these principals, I was put in contact with over 20 preschool teachers, with whom I either communicated directly via e-mail or met in person to discuss my research verbally and in writing. After receiving information, fifteen chose to participate. Taken together, the preschool teachers who participated in this research self-identified as follows: 15 women, five men, and one non-binary individual. Many described having diverse ethnic and class backgrounds. For instance, two of the preschool teachers told me they do not have to work, but they want to because it is rewarding. Three participants were not born in Sweden and moved here as adults. The participants' ages ranged from mid-20s to early 60s, and their experience as preschool teachers ranged from one to over 30 years.

Preschool children also participated in this research. However, they are not the subjects put into focus in this research. I have included them in the research materials and analyses only when they interact with preschool teachers participating in this research during the observation phase. The children were located through the participating preschool teachers, who gave an informational letter to parents or legal guardians of the children in their respective classes (See my informational letter to Parents in **Appendix Two**). It is the parents or legal guardians who have signed the consent form and not the children. As such, I was in contact with a few of the parents who had specific questions. One parent, for instance, was curious about the theories I would use to interpret the research

material. Another was curious about what brought me to this research, and how he could read the articles later. Totally, 67 children participated, ranging in age from 1 to 6 years old. I have identified them as 32 girls and 35 boys. I did inform the children about who I was and what I was doing during the observations. This was most often done during circle time when we all gathered for a collective activity at the start of the day. The children seemed unbothered by my presence, for instance, with some of them asking if I could read for them or if they could sit in my lap.

### *Semi-structured Interviews*

I depended on semi-structured, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews with preschool teachers in Articles II through IV. The preschool teachers and I participated in two sets of semi-structured interviews together, each with a different focus and at different points in time during fieldwork. The first semi-structured interview marked the beginning of the fieldwork phase. In this interview, I focused on the preschool teachers' personal identities, the preschool teaching occupation, and perspectives on gender equality and gender equality work (See the interview guide in **Appendix Three**). The second semi-structured interview was the fourth and final phase of fieldwork. This interview focused on preschool teachers' interpretations of the gender equality mandate and their perspectives on gender equality work. Additionally, this last phase of interviews made it possible to build on earlier phases of fieldwork because I could ask questions about the research subject interviews, participant observations, photos, and the documents they shared with me (See the interview guide in **Appendix Four**).

I chose to use semi-structured interviews as they allowed me to address my research questions and compare preschool teachers' responses. At the same time, they facilitated an open design that allowed preschool teachers to shape the development of the interviews. This, again, was part of the critical ethnographic approach, enabling participants to be agentic co-creators, rather than objects. Preschool teachers could steer and convey their understandings during the interview because it was approached as a "dynamic, meaning-making occasion" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2002, p. 116). This means that I followed the interview guide but waited for participants to lead me in new directions. And so, I often asked additional questions not in the interview guide. For instance, follow-up questions to encourage the preschool teachers to elaborate on their process of meaning-making or to provide more information about a specific topic they had taken up in response to a question I asked.

The majority of these interviews were conducted "in real life," meaning we were physically in the same room. However, some were done over video conference software due to the pandemic. There were times when meeting face-to-face was simply not possible due to the risk of contracting COVID-19. However, the first phase of semi-structured interviews was almost entirely in person. I believe that this benefited all phases of the research tremendously, as the participants and I had already met and established a good connection and communication around the research. There were definitely differences in

the type of contact we built. For instance, some participants were very personal and wanted to remain in contact, while others preferred to keep in touch only in relation to the research. Again, I tried to follow their lead.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, allowing me to revisit them. This was especially important because I have written in English and conducted interviews in Swedish, which required me to translate the interview excerpts used in the articles. All participants were given access to their transcripts and audio recordings of each interview, allowing them to review what they said in Swedish. Many of them said this was also helpful for them to reflect on what they said and to dig deeper into the interview topics. Additionally, all preschool teachers were offered the chance to see how I translated their quotes into English. I did this to facilitate transparency and the co-creation of the research material. However, none of the participants took this opportunity. Some of them said they trusted me, while others said they found it awkward or uncomfortable to see what they said. Still, all participants in the third phase of interviews were confronted verbally with quotes from their previous interviews, as well as with observations I made, allowing us to discuss and, at times, clarify what they meant or what I observed.

### *Research Subject Inter-viewing*

In the research I conducted prior to this dissertation and during the first phase of interviewing for this project, I observed that, despite my best efforts, the interview situation was characterized by palpable power asymmetries and tensions (Wojnicka, 2020). This was evident in some cases, when preschool teachers admitted to feeling nervous, or when I observed one preschool teacher break out in a rash on her neck. These and similar experiences led me to reconsider the ethics of interviewing. And so, I developed an interview approach called research subject inter-viewing. Research subject inter-viewing is an approach that facilitates audio or video-recorded interviews between at least two research subjects, who may or may not know each other (Rådesjö, 2025a). The researcher serves as both the organizer and coordinator; however, they are not present during the interview. Alternatively, this approach involves a design in which the research subjects themselves conduct interviews with one another in a conversational style, using an interview guide provided by the researcher (Rådesjö, 2025a). In shifting the power and knowledge dynamics, fourteen preschool teachers participated in this approach to discuss their gender equality work. The interview guide included one section with 16 vignettes describing hypothetical situations in the preschool that could relate to gender equality work. Additionally, three other sections of interview questions were designed to stimulate discussion on the vignettes and their broader work related to gender equality (See the interview guide in **Appendix Five**).

Research subject inter-viewing is linked to the semi-structured interviews, because it allowed preschool teachers to describe and expand on how they think about the gender equality mandate and gender equality work together rather than with me. However, it is also connected to participant observation because the vignettes enabled them to imagine

different situations or even reminded them of similar ones they had experienced in practice. Talking to another preschool teacher altered the dynamic of the interview situation in several ways. It made it a conversational exchange, which led to them laughing and learning from each other (for instance, noting down ideas the other preschool teacher had related to gender equality work) (Rådesjö, 2025a). It also created a situation in which the two participants in the interview shared a similar knowledge base regarding the questions, unlike the typical researcher-participant relationship. This meant that they asked each other questions and discussed topics I would not have brought up (Rådesjö, 2025a).

All of these research subject inter-views were audio-recorded. These interviews were, of course, also in Swedish and required my translation into English. Even here, all participants had access to their interview recordings and transcripts. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all of these interviews were conducted via video conferencing. This allowed me to arrange seven interviews with 14 preschool teachers, who were spread out over a vast geographic distance, enabling them to choose where they wanted to be during the interview. I arranged the times through an online meeting-scheduling tool, where people marked their availability to meet. I used a function that made all participants anonymous to each other. This strategy meant that I did not pair the preschool teachers myself; instead, I made it possible for them to pair themselves based on their availability. However, I had to ask two participants if they could meet at another time than they had chosen. This was because they did not select the same time as another person. None of the pairs knew each other; they met for the first time on the video-conferencing platform.

I tried to follow the same procedure in every interview. I introduced the participants to each other by their real first names. I emphasized the importance of confidentiality, noting that they could decide together how much or how little to reveal about themselves. I reminded them that they would be given pseudonyms in the published research and that their privacy would remain a top priority. They saw the interview guide together for the first time. However, there were some technical issues with this. I was unable to upload the interview guide to the chat due to formatting issues, and I did not attach it through the chat because it would require them to have multiple windows open on their computer. Instead, I showed the participants the interview guide by using the 'share screen' feature on the video-conferencing platform. Before leaving, I read through each part of the interview guide, but I did not interpret or elaborate on any meanings. After this, we determined a time frame for when I should scroll down for them in the interview guide. This was at intervals of about 20 minutes, twice. Then, I left the preschool teachers to their own devices after I asked if they had any questions or comments. Finally, I told them that I would be nearby if they needed me. I told them that during their interview, I would be transcribing other interviews and would have headphones on. I told them to wave their arms or yell for me if they needed anything. I then left and placed the computer about two meters away, with the screen slightly turned away from me. I recorded the audio of their interview and, while wearing headphones, transcribed the audio of other interviews as the research subject inter-views were being conducted. Each of these interviews lasted around 45 minutes to an hour.

### *Participant observation, photo observations, and document analysis*

I depend on various forms of observation in this research. These layers of observation include: first, participant observation, or my immersed and participatory presence in “the field”; second, the photos taken by me and the participants of this research of their work settings; third, the records produced by preschool teachers to plan and document their work. I view participant observation as requiring the researcher to become immersed in the context of the research subjects. This type of immersion requires the researcher and the participants to negotiate a level of participation and involvement (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). During observations, I participated in the preschool’s core activities, but not as a full member. My participation in this sense enabled me to ask informal questions and engage in discussions with others in the preschool, including children. This sometimes divided my focus; however, I think it also toned down the feeling of being observed. And so, while this is a benefit, I also think this may have led children to believe that I was working as a substitute teacher. This is ethically tricky because, while I describe my role as an overt participating observer since all preschool personnel and legal guardians knew I was there to conduct research—since I had provided information beforehand, had them sign consent forms, and posted signs informing adults of my presence on the days I was there—it was more difficult to communicate my identity and intentions to all the children (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). I told them in age-appropriate ways during circle time. I tried to say something similar to each group: I introduced myself and said I work at a school for adults as a teacher and scientist. I explained that I am visiting their preschool to learn about how preschool teachers do their work. Most kids seemed to shrug this off—I attribute this to the high number of people, especially women, who pass through preschools as substitutes, for instance.

During the participant observations, I took field notes by hand in a small notebook. However, I did not walk around writing things down as I felt that would be a very objectifying practice. What I mean by that is that I did not want to create a feeling of being observed, making preschool teachers self-conscious and uncomfortable. To avoid this, I took breaks and found a more private area to write things down throughout my time at the preschools. I did not observe preschool teachers’ work for extended periods, as in traditional ethnographies. This was primarily because of COVID-19, but also because I wanted to observe in different preschools. However, since the observations were conducted almost a year after my initial contact with the preschool teachers and following two prior phases of research, we were already familiar with each other, which also made the observations feel more relaxed. And so, I approached observations with an attitude of ‘Deep hanging out’, developed by Chicano anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (cited in Snodgrass et al., 2024). However, the depth in this sense was not achieved through time spent in the field observing, but rather through time spent engaging with participants, and what, in most cases, developed into our seemingly collective sense of understanding and comfort.

In addition to the participant observations, preschool teachers and I took photos of their working environments that did not include children. Receiving and taking photos led to fascinating, diverse ideas of what to consider in the material aspects of gender equality work. For instance, I asked them to take pictures that highlight parts of their work they associate with gender equality. I told them I would not publish these photos to protect their privacy and maintain their confidentiality. These photos are used in this research as a form of notetaking in the environments where I carried out participant observation. However, the preschool teachers at the preschools I did not observe also sent me pictures of their research environments. We discussed these photos during the third interview.

Lastly, my plan from the beginning was to conduct a document analysis of preschool teachers' gender equality work. For this reason, I asked preschool teachers to share examples of their planning and documentation for their teaching. I specified that these did not have to be directly related to gender equality work, as many preschool teachers stated they did not have documentation showing gender equality work, i.e., either planning or carrying out this type of teaching. However, due to the large amount of research material, the documents mainly served as discussion points during the third interview.

### *Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the Research Material From the Fieldwork*

I analyzed the research material co-created during fieldwork using reflexive thematic analysis, a method defined by a six-step process for generating themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). These guidelines include dataset familiarization, data coding, theme generation, theme development and review, theme refining, defining and naming, and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2022). These are not rigid guidelines, and they allow dynamic movement between steps. And so, while the descriptions below appear linear, I can preface them by saying that there was a lot of nonlinear movement between these different steps or phases. For this reason, I will admit that it feels somewhat awkward to write a separate section on how I have approached analysis, since I have, to some extent, analyzed at every phase of this research. In this section, I have included the concrete actions I have taken directly related to the interview and observation materials.

### *Analyzing the Interview Material*

The research material from my fieldwork was analyzed thematically in six phases. The first phase of analysis was done when I transcribed the interviews. This process made it possible for me to very slowly comb through every utterance in the interviews; this was familiarization (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I aimed to transcribe the interviews verbatim, but even these transcripts are partial and incomplete (Hart, 2022), for instance, they do not capture the body language or the physical context. Analyzing in this way allowed me to "get lost," or wander relatively aimlessly through the material (Hart, 2022). This was a very inductive part of analysis. I did this by trying to remain very open to every aspect. I actively tried to avoid narrowing the material down in any way related to my research questions or interpreting the transcriptions through theory. I just focused on (re-)listening

to the preschool teachers. I noticed a lot of things during this phase. For instance, after transcribing the first few audio recordings from the first phase of interviews, I realized that I need to learn to be quiet and not interrupt. I also started to notice overlaps and divergences across the different transcriptions. I didn't always mark these at this point—but it helped give me a big-picture perspective across the material.

In the second phase of analysis, after transcribing, I quickly reread the transcriptions for typos before sending them to the preschool teachers. But more than looking for typos, my aim in re-reading them was to highlight general patterns related to the dissertation's overarching aims and questions. These patterns were in keywords, arguments, absences, commonalities, and differences between interviews; in other words, they were more semantic content codes that I had not given theoretical meaning to at this phase (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I did not mark these things in the transcripts; instead, I created a document to sort these patterns, or codes. I used these interview “parts” to reflect together with participants in the third interview.

In the second and third phases of analysis, I reread the relevant interview transcriptions for Articles II-V, focusing on each article's distinct aims and questions. In the second phase, this meant I re-read all relevant interview transcripts and coded them for theoretical meaning in line with the articles' aims and questions, using latent coding (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Then, I returned to theory by reading about and trying to identify concepts and theories that could help me understand the codes in order to create themes. This was the fourth phase. This also meant writing out my interpretations of the theories and concepts, building them into a theoretical framework to give me a more solid background or lens. In this phase, I would return to the research material to draw the codes together to determine themes, along with my theoretical framework, aims, and research questions. Sometimes, however, the framework was not cutting it or was not strong enough. By this, I mean it was not helping me to understand the material. So, I developed and extended theory in this process too—that is in response to the research material. During the fifth phase, I felt the need to tidy groupings. This part of the analysis made me aware that this form of analysis does not always account for the messiness of social reality (Law, 2004)—so the themes are the foundation but not the final phase of analysis.

The sixth and final phase of analyzing was writing out the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). By generating themes and thinking with theory, writing is not just a way of reporting and cataloging research, but a form of thinking, meaning-making, and knowledge production (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2010). In this stage, it became crucial to rethink the themes in light of the research's aims and questions. This phase was also one in which I wanted to make my role as the analyst clear to people who will engage with my research. As Richardson & St. Pierre (2018) write: “[Researchers] do not have to try to play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal and atemporal general knowledge. They can eschew the questionable metanarrative of scientific objectivity and still have plenty to say as situated speakers, subjectivities engaged in knowing/telling about the world as they perceive [through theory].” (p. 1413). As a result, I attempted to establish my presence throughout all my work, including the written analyses.

### *Analyzing the Observation Material*

While in the field, I initially thought that just going with the flow meant avoiding theoretical judgments or constraints to maintain openness. However, I determined that the theories bouncing around in my head during observation were useful, so I noted them down in the research material. Once I wrote them down, I could drop them to go with the flow and remain open and more inductive. Now, I see that I was analyzing at this point, even if only loosely, and I think of these as moments when theory and practice meet, when abstraction meets lived and embodied experiences. I did not want to have a deductive approach, though, so this thinking was a reminder to try and see beyond my own understanding. The systematic analysis began with multiple readings and reflections on the observation materials, including field notes, photographs, and documents; this was a familiarization phase (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Sometimes, for instance, I read the field notes, looked at the pictures, and the interview transcripts of the same preschool teacher to get a sense of their gender equality work across different points in the material creation process. Many of these cross-readings developed into questions and discussion points during the third interview. This led to the identification of big themes across all the research material, such as those related to dresses. That is, through simple immersion in all the material, I connected many notable moments to the analyses done in earlier phases of the research process.

I did not transcribe my field notes, partly because they included pictures, such as classroom floor layouts. But it is also because I conducted a hand-coded reflexive thematic analysis. Since my fieldnotes are in the same notebook, I read across them, creating code-based notes in the second phase of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, I focused on what was done and said during observations. And then, I thought more abstractly about what the codes could mean by thinking with theory. I developed themes across the codes in the third phase. In the fourth phase, I aimed to identify, describe, and analyze together with theory to draw themes together and move into the fifth phase of refining them. I returned to theory during this process, and again, saw this reflexive thematic analysis as a limit to the mess—meaning that, again, I viewed it as a way for me to sketch out patterns across observations. However, it was not the endpoint of the analysis. Instead, in the sixth phase, when writing the analyses, I merged the observation and interview material, allowing me to further refine themes and to integrate this with rereading theory and writing up.

### **Ethical Consideration and Practice**

I have discussed my ethical considerations and practice throughout this dissertation. However, it is important to note that I have ethical approval to carry out this research from Ethical Review Authority [Etiksprövningsmyndigheten] (Dnr 2020-00667). I often

thought about ethics through Barad's (2007) concept of ethico-onto-epistemology, defined as the inseparability of ethics, ontology, and epistemology in engaging with (scientific) knowledge production, scientific practices, and the world itself and its inhabitants (p. 90). This has led me to question social scientific practices and, ultimately, take a stand against doing rapport *to* participants (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002) by creating research subject inter-viewing (Rådesjö, 2025a). This also means that I refuse to do research as rape (Reinharz, 1983). That is, I reject exploitative, extractive, and violating practices that involve entering a participant's world, collecting their personal information, and interpreting it for my own benefit. In contrast, I have tried, through feminist scientific methods and my own humanity, to center participants' agency and autonomy by prioritizing their consent and well-being, creating research that benefits participants more than it put them at risk. Moreover, I have designed this research with the hope of benefiting children, preschools, and society more broadly by taking it on in the first place.

All seven preschool principals and 21 preschool teachers received an informational letter outlining the background, aims, methodology, and ethics of this research. Based on the information provided to participants, these considerations align with the study's feminist ethico-onto-epistemology. I have designed it to give participants the opportunity to speak for themselves about gender equality/gender equality work, in their own words and based on their own expertise. I told participating preschool teachers that they did not have to answer questions they found uncomfortable or participate in the research at all if they did not want to. I also ensured that participants could access their own research materials at any time and that they would always have the opportunity to review and comment on what they said before publishing. All participating preschool teachers and consenting legal guardians have signed consent forms (See **Appendix Six**). Furthermore, I have prioritized confidentiality, and all names in the research, except my own, are pseudonyms.

Some other specific measures that I took included providing a polisbelastningsregistret (my criminal record) to all the preschools where I observed for this research. Other researchers have noted that this poses a dilemma for me, given my feminist perspective. However, carceral logics remain a subject of ongoing feminist debate. But, of course, I want to be clear: Especially as an American, I am deeply critical of the role of policing and carceral systems in reproducing systemic violence and inequalities. In the context of this research, the institutional framework required me to provide my criminal record; rather than signaling an endorsement of carceral logics in their totality, this act reflects my entanglement in the deep structures I seek to critique. At the same time, the requirement to show my criminal background in safeguarding children, I feel, is very reasonable. A final measure I took to safeguard the children and all other people at each preschool I observed was to sign a tystnadsplikt, or an agreement not to disclose personal or sensitive information about anyone at the preschool. This agreement is regulated by offentlighets- och sekretesslagen [Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act] (SFS 2009:400).

## Chapter Five Implications

The methodological considerations and methods that I outlined in this chapter demonstrate how my qualitative research design has been shaped by a critical feminist ethnographic approach that foregrounds relational power, situated knowledge, and the co-creation of knowledge. By combining critical policy analysis, semi-structured interviews, research subject interviews, and participant observation, I have sought to approach the research aims and questions that I put forth in this dissertation from multiple, intersecting vantage points. My methodology positions knowledge production as a relational process unfolding through interactions among researcher, participants, and theory. This combination of methods has enabled me to critically explore power relations and dynamics, both discursively and materially, to understand different lived and embodied experiences in relation to affect. The methods are tied together as a methodology with critical feminist ethnography as the overarching approach. As a result, rather than employing four detached methods, I have taken to studying enactments of power across multiple registers where critical policy analysis was put to work in discursive structural terrains; semi-structured interviews facilitated knowing how preschool teachers navigate them; research subject inter-viewing troubled researcher-led norms; observation situated all of this in material-affective practice. In the following chapter, I will summarize each of the four articles, showing how these methodological choices were enacted in practice and how they collectively contribute to critically exploring preschool teachers' relational power in shaping the (im)possibilities of gender equality work in Swedish preschools.

All four articles that make up this compilation dissertation are appended. In this chapter, I summarize each article, providing concise descriptions of the aims, research questions, theoretical frameworks, methods, results, conclusions, and contributions. This chapter is primarily descriptive. I begin by jumping directly into summarizing each article. Then, I include a table as a brief reminder of the key “parts” of each article. This paves the way for the synthesizing concluding discussion of these articles in the next and final chapter.

## Article I

**Gender Inequality Problems and their (Im)possibilities: Critically Exploring Swedish Preschools’ Gender Equality Mandate** – *Published in Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*

In this article, I critically explore the theoretical complexities of the gender equality mandate, problem constructions, and subsequent (im)possibilities for interpretation. The research problem I delineate is rooted in prior research indicating that preschool teachers and other preschool staff find the gender equality mandate challenging to interpret. Rooted in preschool teachers’ professional responsibility to lead collective interpretation of the gender equality mandate, together with, for instance, child minders, I ground my understanding in gender equality as an essentially contested empty and floating signifier (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Rönnblom, 2011; Žižek, 1989). I frame the gender equality mandate as a document constellation with a historical relationship and mutual citations. Consequently, my primary focus is on all five versions of the National Preschool Curriculum (Lpfö 1998, Lpfö [revision] 2010, Lpfö [revision] 2016, Lpfö 2018, and Lpfö [revision] 2025) in relation to the Discrimination Act (SFS 2008:567), the Education Act (SFS 2010:567), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

*The research questions* that guide my thinking and analysis are: What feminist theoretical problems are constructed in Swedish preschools’ gender equality mandate? What is made (im)possible when interpreting the problem constructions through feminist theories? As the second question suggests, I do not simply identify gender inequality problems in this article. I critically explore the political consequences of the (im)possibilities integral in interpretations of problem constructions. By centering the *political*, I analyze how problem constructions (re)produce power relations through a dimension of antagonism (Mouffe, 2005). This focuses on how the mandate shapes life chances, or who benefits and who is marginalized. My analysis attends to the field of possibilities for interpretation by showing what the constructions include, exclude, take for granted, and leave unproblematic.

*My critical policy analysis* is structured by my two research questions formed after two of Bacchi’s (2009) six ‘What is the problem represented to be?’ questions. I analyze the gender equality mandate as a policy through a Bacchi-inspired critical policy analysis based

on diffraction (Ulmer, 2016). *The results of my critical policy analysis* show that problem constructions are based on inequalities between binary oppositional categories, socially constructed differences between these subject positions, heteronormativity limitations, and intersectional inequalities. These problem constructions are based on different feminist theories that contradict and undermine one another while simultaneously leaving some identities unproblematic. The problem constructions, for example, are in chorus based on binary oppositional sex categories and socially constructed differences while problematizing heteronormativity. This both reinforces the gender binary and challenges it. What is also left unproblematic, through explicit exclusion, in all versions of the preschool curriculum are non-binary, intersex identities, and intersectional identities, including identities related to race/skin color and social class.

*With this article, I contribute* to a theoretical shift in focus from the limits in preschool teachers' ability to interpret the gender mandate to how the gender equality mandate itself makes interpretation challenging. I show empirically that contradictory problem constructions requiring paradoxical solutions make it impossible to follow the gender equality mandate without reproducing gender inequalities. I suggest incorporating additional gendered identities, such as intersex and non-binary, and adding concepts related to race and class to make these issues actionable. Doing this would also deemphasize the gender binary. *A main conclusion* of mine in this article is that contradictions and exclusions within the gender equality mandate are likely unavoidable. However, the results underline the importance of preschool teachers' professional judgment in shaping the (im)possibilities of gender equality work. I argue that the contradictions and exclusions in the problem constructions can be reframed as openings, enabling preschool teachers to exercise interpretive agency. That is, they can fill the mandate with diverse theoretical meanings, enabling gender equality work to be done in varied, situated ways according to the needs of their preschool. I warn, though, that without consideration, interpretations may (un)intentionally reinforce marginalization. It is essential to consider the political implications when interpreting the gender equality mandate; feminist theories are practical tools for doing so.

## Article II

### **Not a Bunch of Politically Correct Ms. Prysseliuses: How Preschool Teachers' Gender (In)equality Knowledges are Shaped In and Through the Swedish Preschool – *Unpublished Manuscript***

In this article, I critically explore how preschool teachers' situated knowledges related to the gender equality mandate and work are (re)shaped through and within preschools, as public sector gendered organizations, and what this means for practice. Research shows the gender equality mandate is often misunderstood, rarely enacted, and gender inequalities persist (Heikkilä, 2023; Vallberg Roth & Tallberg Broman, 2018). I situate this within societal debates, where Deputy Prime Minister Ebba Busch described preschool teachers

as “politically correct Ms. Prysseliuses” who enforce “genusflum [gender fluff],” portraying them as feminized enforcers of ideology, dutifully policing children’s behavior to fit political agendas. These assumptions are linked to preschools as gendered organizations within a white heteropatriarchy, positioning preschool teachers accordingly. Hence, it’s crucial to view preschool teachers as agentic subjects whose knowledge is (re)shaped through and within the preschool’s gendered organization. I focus on preschool teachers because they are responsible for leading interpretations of the gender equality mandate and gender equality work. The research questions that guide my thinking and analysis are: How are preschool teachers’ situated knowledges related to gender equality (re)shaped within and through the preschool as a public gendered organization? In what ways do these situated knowledges (re)shape the (im)possibilities for doing gender equality work?

Framing the preschool as a public sector gendered organization (Connell, 2006), I think with Allen (1999) to connect power relations that shape structural order and everyday agency, where gender norms are created, (re)produced, negotiated, contested, and undone through power dynamics within a local gender regime (Acker, 1990; Connell, 2006; Davis, 1981). I do not see women’s work as universal, but rather from a sociology of occupations perspective (Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2012), professionalization is based on the ‘ideal worker’ aligned with a male norm, which preschool teachers must navigate, reproduce, or resist (Acker, 1990). Here, I even use occupational and organizational professionalism to tease out the tensions that shape preschool teachers’ knowledges on gender equalities (Evetts, 2011). I see gender equality as a contested, political, and floating signifier (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2005; Žižek, 1989), filled with different meanings based on situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988).

In this article, I rely on research materials from all interview phases and 112 hours of participant observation with 21 preschool teachers from 7 preschools. My thematic reflexive analysis shows that preschool teachers’ knowledge of gender equality is shaped by occupational professionalism, emphasizing the rationalization of care, differentiation, and science-based knowledge, which creates a knower-knowledge hierarchy. Their knowledge is also shaped by the history of the occupation and by stereotypes about who can be a preschool teacher and know about gender equality, based on gender, race, and ethnicity. Their knowledge is also shaped by their experiences of gender (in)equalities, leading preschool teachers to either politicize or depoliticize gender equality work. Through organizational professionalism, there are conflicts on whether gender equality work is (not) about creating the same and equal gendered opportunities, whether the gender equality mandate does (not) challenge the existing gender order, whether gender should (not) be put in focus in practice, or whether gender/sex is (not) biological and (not) binary. Preschool teachers say that these differences in meaning make it challenging to develop an organizational approach to gender equality work when they are unable to discuss it. Some preschools develop conflict management strategies, but many preschool teachers approach gender equality work individually. In research subject interviews, disagreements were handled with reference to empirical research and proven experience.

*A main conclusion* in this article is that challenges with the gender equality mandate cannot be reduced to a knowledge-deficit issue that can be solved by learning more theory or research. Instead, preschool teachers' situated knowledges about the gender equality mandate are shaped within public sector gendered organizations through occupational professionalization, negotiation of belonging, gender order experiences, and disagreements. These knowledges influence (im)possibilities by constraining the knower and knowledge's legitimacy, prompting learning, and motivating work through either politicization or administrative practices, leading to conflict, conflict management, or individual responses. The article reconceptualizes gender equality work as shaped by occupational professionalism, organizational professionalism, lived experiences, and power dynamics within public sector gendered organizations, which influence what is possible. *This article contributes* empirically to showing that doing gender equality work involves navigating conditions that enable certain knowledges over others. It contributes to the sociology of occupations and feminist organizational theory by illustrating how situated knowledges function as mechanisms and products in public sector gendered organizations.

### Article III

#### **'No, She Can't Be the Hulk!': Critically Exploring Opposition to Swedish Preschools' Gender Equality Work and Preschool Teachers' Responses to It—** *Published in Gender and Education*

In this article, I critically explore opposition to the Swedish preschool's gender equality work, and how preschool teachers express, experience, and respond to it. Although the mandate for gender equality has been part of the national curriculum for decades, opposition has been deemed a 'significant' issue, yet it remains under-researched. I place opposition at the center of inquiry and contextualize it in the realm of Swedish exceptionalism and the rise of anti-gender and anti-feminist discourse, movement, and politics. Inspired by Verloo (2018a), I draw on a variety of opposition understanding to frame the (un)intentional ways in which gender equality work is passively or actively avoided, prevented, or hindered. I frame my understanding of opposition within the context of Amy Allen's (1999) feminist theory of power, which is expressed as power-over, power-to, and power-with. From this perspective, I align opposition with power-over. I consequently frame resistance as activities that, in various ways, either passively or actively promote or facilitate gender equality work; I align this with power-to or power-with. I analyzed 52 interviews (all phases) with 21 preschool teachers and observed 10 of them at work. *My research questions* in this article guide my thinking and my analysis. They are formulated as follows: How do preschool teachers express and experience opposition to gender equality work in Swedish preschools? How do they respond to opposition?

*My reflexive thematic analysis* demonstrates that opposition is expressed actively and passively by preschool teachers, other preschool staff, children, parents, and societal actors. Preschool teachers more often express passive opposition—by insisting they lack

the time or knowledge to prioritize gender equality—but also actively, by questioning whether certain gender equality efforts are truly necessary. Other preschool staff show opposition by reinforcing gender binaries by dividing children into “girls and boys” or removing play dresses from preschool classrooms. Children, too, can resist, refusing to allow girls to take boy-coded roles during play or insisting that families must include both a mother and a father. Parents frequently express opposition, particularly when they object to boys wearing skirts or when they are uncomfortable with male preschool teachers caring for young children. Finally, preschool teachers experience societal actors—including politicians—as creating a hostile climate that filters down to the preschool, leaving them unsure how to respond. These diverse expressions of opposition are not identical. Passive opposition, such as appeals to lack of time and knowledge, quietly sidelines gender equality work without openly rejecting it. Active opposition, by contrast, aligns with anti-feminist, anti-gender, or post-feminist discourses, framing gender pedagogy as ideological, unnecessary, or even harmful. Yet, both forms operate as power-over, constraining the field of possibilities for preschool teachers and children alike.

Preschool teachers respond by either accepting or ignoring opposition, or by hiding or defending gender equality work. Some responses to opposition are characterised by power-to and power-with, which shape gendered (im)possibilities. Some accept opposition, deferring to parents or children in the name of respecting their perspectives. Others ignore it, continuing gender equality work without engaging in open confrontation. Still others hide their gender equality work—allowing boys to wear dresses in preschool but not when parents arrive, or quietly affirming children’s gender identities without sharing this with families. The common strategy, however, is defense, in which preschool teachers explicitly justify their work on gender equality through curriculum mandates, professional ethics, or research. Defense often involves both power-to and power-with, as teachers draw on colleagues for support or use norm-critical pedagogy to engage children in questioning stereotypes.

*My main conclusion* in this article is that opposition *is* a significant problem produced by preschool teachers, other preschool staff, children, parents, and broader societal forces. Preschool teachers’ responses to opposition are critical to making gender equality work possible. For instance, when preschool teachers defend this work, the (im)possibilities in Swedish preschools are (re)shaped by resisting existing power relations embedded in deep structures that perpetuate normative gender subjectification. *Through this research, I contribute* an analysis that demonstrates how opposition can be understood from a power perspective, distinguishing between active and passive forms. In the context of gender equality work in preschools, this analysis made it clear that the type of opposition is of little relevance to outcomes, whether it is active, passive, (un)intentional, strategic, routine, or unconsidered, since all types lead to the reproduction of power relations (Allen, 1999). One key distinction, however, is that active opposition could be connected to anti-genderism, post- and anti-feminism, as oppositional reasoning was explicit and either intentionally or unintentionally constructed in alignment with these views.

## Article IV

### **Opposing Tough Princesses and Girly-boys: How Dresses Make Doing Gender in Swedish Preschools (Im)possible** – *Revised and Resubmitted to Gender and Society*

In this article, I critically explore how dresses make doing, undoing, and redoing gender (im)possible through gender equality work in Swedish preschools. I frame preschools as an important arena for gender equality, and by extension, as situated in the rise of anti-gender and anti-feminist discourse, movement, and politics. From a relational power perspective, I look at preschool teachers' expressions and experiences of comfort and discomfort in response to dresses (Ahmed, 2007). These feelings influence whether gender is redone, undone, or done (Butler, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Drawing on Georg Simmel's concept of differentiation, I introduce meaningful differentiation as a way to challenge heteronormativity through power-over. Based on 52 interviews (all phases) with 21 preschool teachers and observations with 10 of them, *my research question*, guiding my understanding and analysis in this article, is: How do dresses make doing gender in Swedish preschools (im)possible?

*My reflexive thematic analysis shows* how dresses create an active site for shaping the (im)possible by triggering feelings of (dis)comfort and catalyzing conformity or meaningful differentiation depending on the "climate" or "culture" in the preschool. When dresses are reserved for girls, they are met with opposition from parents, children, and staff. Some consequences include the removal of all play dresses and one boy switching preschools. Such responses enact power-over, making it impossible to challenge heteronormativity. This is especially when meaningful differentiation causes discomfort when boys wear dresses. However, my analysis also shows that when the "climate" fosters reframing dresses within princess and girl culture through power-to and power-with, it is possible to redo and undo gender with dresses.

*A main conclusion* in this article is related to the importance of preschool teachers in either hindering or opening new possibilities for children to engage in meaningful differentiation. *With this research, I contribute* empirically to how seemingly insignificant items, such as dresses, can have a significant impact on gender equality efforts. In doing so, I also contribute theoretically to the ongoing debate on redoing, undoing, and doing gender with the concept of meaningful differentiation. I also extend Allen's (199) theory of relational power by queering it and showing how enactments of opposition are lived materially and affectively in preschool life, showing how the same object (a dress) can be the site of domination, agency, and solidarity. By positioning preschools as sites where children's everyday practices are deeply political, I contribute to debates within the sociology of childhood to include material politics and queer (im)possibility.

# Overview of Compilation Articles Table

*Table 1. Overview of Articles I-IV included in the dissertation*

| Article | Aim                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Research Question(s)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Theory                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Methods                                                                                                                      | Results                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I       | The aim is to critically explore the theoretical complexities of the gender equality mandate problem constructions and the subsequent (im)possibilities for interpretation.                                                                          | What problems are constructed in Swedish preschools' gender equality mandate? What (im)possibilities may these problems imply for interpretation?                                                                                                                   | Gender equality mandate is theorized as policy (Ball, 1993). Gender equality as an essentially contested empty and floating signifier (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Žižek, 1989), indicating that it can be filled with different meanings based on knowledge as situated practice (Haraway, 1988), explained with different feminist theories (Lorber, 2012)   | Critical Policy Analysis, inspired by WPR (Bacchi, 2009) using diffraction (Ulmer, 2016)                                     | Article I shows how contradictions and exclusions are embedded in the problem constructs of the gender equality mandate. These often rely on binary categories of "girls" and "boys," while also attempting to destabilize them. Problem constructions exclude nonbinary and intersex identities and intersectional identities, including race/skin color and class.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| II      | The aim is to critically explore how preschool teachers' situated knowledges related to the gender equality mandate and work are (re)shaped through and within preschools, as public sector gendered organizations and what this means for practice. | How are preschool teachers' situated knowledges related to gender equality (re)shaped within and through the preschool as a public gendered organization? In what ways do these situated knowledges (re)shape the (im)possibilities for doing gender equality work? | Connell's (2006) understanding of public sector gendered organizations, Davis (1981) intersectional thinking around work gender equality as an essentially contested empty and floating signifier (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Žižek, 1989), indicating that it can be filled with different meanings based on knowledge as situated practice (Haraway, 1988). | Two phases of semi-structured interviews, Research subject inter-views, and participant observation                          | Article II demonstrates how preschool teachers' situated knowledges related to the gender equality mandate and work are (re)shaped within and through preschools as public-sector gendered organizations through professionalization, negotiation of belonging, gender order experiences, and disagreements with colleagues. These situated knowledges (re)shape (im)possibilities by constraining knowledge legitimacy, compelling preschool teachers to learn, turning this work into either a political or an administrative practice, and prompting either conflict management solutions or individual approaches. |
| III     | The aim is to critically explore opposition to gender equality work and how preschool teachers respond to it.                                                                                                                                        | How do preschool teachers express and experience opposition to gender equality work in Swedish preschools? How do they respond to opposition?                                                                                                                       | Power is theorized as relational using Amy Allen's (1999) feminist conception, power-over, power-to, power-with using Verloo's (2018) varieties of opposition.                                                                                                                                                                                            | Two phases of semi-structured interviews, Research subject inter-views, and participant observations                         | Opposition to gender equality work is expressed by preschool teachers, other preschool staff, children, parents, and societal actors. Preschool teachers respond to opposition by either accepting or ignoring opposition, or by hiding or defending gender equality work. Some responses to opposition are characterized by power-to and power-with, which reshape gendered (im)possibilities.                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| IV      | The aim is to critically explore how dresses make gender equality work in Swedish preschools (im)possible.                                                                                                                                           | How do dresses make gender equality work in Swedish preschools (im)possible?                                                                                                                                                                                        | Allen's (1999) feminist power perspective, Georg Simmel's (1957) concept of conformity, and the development of meaningful differentiation together with extensions of West and Zimmerman's (1987) doing gender and Butler's (2004) undoing gender.                                                                                                        | Two phases of semi-structured interviews, Research subject inter-views, photo/document analysis and participant observations | Interactions with dresses create an active site for shaping the (im)possibilities for gender equality work by triggering feelings of (dis)comfort and catalysing conformity or meaningful differentiation depending on the "climate" or "culture" in the preschool.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

## Chapter Six Implications

In this chapter, I have summarized the four articles that constitute the core of this compilation dissertation. Article I shows how contradictions and exclusions are embedded in the problem constructs of the gender equality mandate. These often rely on binary categories of “girls” and “boys,” while also attempting to destabilize them. Problem constructions exclude nonbinary, intersex, and intersectional identities, including race/skin color and class. Article II demonstrates how preschool teachers’ situated knowledges related to the gender equality mandate and work are (re)shaped within and through preschools as public sector gendered organizations through occupational professionalism, negotiation of belonging, gender order experiences, and disagreements with colleagues. These situated knowledges (re)shape (im)possibilities by constraining their legitimacy, compelling preschool teachers to learn, turning this work into either a political or an administrative practice, and prompting either conflict management solutions or individual approaches. Article III exhibits how preschool teachers experience and express opposition to gender equality. Preschool teachers, other preschool staff, children, parents, and societal actors do active and passive opposition (un)intentionally. Preschool teachers respond by accepting or ignoring opposition, or by hiding or defending gender equality work. Article IV shows how dresses shape the (im)possibilities for gendered subjectivity by focusing on how preschool teachers’ practices shape whether the climate makes undoing or redoing gender possible. This chapter has primarily been descriptive, serving the important purpose of laying the foundation for the following and final chapter. In the last chapter, I will bring the articles together in an integrative analysis in relation to the theoretical perspectives, previous research, and overarching questions introduced in this kappa.

In this final chapter, I want to slow the movement to stay with the trouble (Haraway, 2016) and let it, at the very least, ripple the surface (Ahmed, 2017). To gently remind you, my broad aim in this dissertation has been to critically explore preschool teachers' relational power in shaping the (im)possibilities of gender equality work in Sweden. As a result, I have conducted this qualitative research using a critical feminist ethnographic approach, as it facilitates critical exploration of queer gendered understandings rooted in social engagements (Valocchi, 2005), which give way to descriptive accounts, and, more critically, their conditions of possibility (Butler, 1990, p. xxii). Informed and guided by an eclectic selection of critical theories, I have analyzed multiple empirical materials, including the national Swedish preschool curriculum, policy documents, field notes from participant observations, and transcripts from three sets of interviews with 21 preschool teachers from seven preschools across Sweden. My specific objective has been to critically explore how power relations shape the (im)possibilities of gender equality work in Swedish preschools, and how preschool teachers navigate power dynamics related to gender equality work in their everyday practices. These overarching questions have guided my critical exploration:

- I. In what ways do power relations enable, constrain, or shape (im)possibilities for preschool teachers' gender equality work in Swedish preschools?
- II. How do preschool teachers negotiate, resist, oppose, or (re)produce (im)possibilities through power dynamics in their everyday gender equality work?
- III. When is gender equality work (im)possible, and why?

In this final chapter, I will begin by synthesizing the general empirical results of my dissertation in relation to these research questions, placing them in dialogue with one another, previous literature, and my theoretical framework. Then, I will draw out the implications of these articles beyond the sum of their parts by addressing the theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions of my dissertation. Finally, I will close this chapter and the dissertation with my overall conclusions and ideas for future directions.

### The Ripples? The Waves? —The Compilation in Dialogue

At the policy level, in Article I, the gender equality mandate enables preschool teachers to problematize power relations between boys and girls, men and women. However, it also enables both biological essentialist/determinist *and* social constructionist interpretations,

producing contradictory tensions. Building on this, Article II shows how these tensions reappear in practice: while preschool teachers agree that gender equality work is important, they differ over whether the gender equality mandate calls for equal treatment, challenging the gender order, recognizing gender as biological or binary, or making gender visible. These differences align with Article I, where I argue that doing gender equality work “by the book” is impossible because it calls on pedagogies that cancel each other out. For instance, gender-neutral strategies make gender invisible, while norm critical pedagogy makes gender norms visible to break them (Lenz Taguchi, 2016). Edström’s (2014) question remains highly relevant: “Are the curriculum formulations perhaps somewhat unfortunately written if interpreted literally?” (p. 554).

The formulation of gender inequality problems between men and women, boys and girls, also constrains how the gender order is understood. It makes women’s and girls’ subordination latent and abstract. This is similar to the seven gender equality goals in Sweden, of which the first five are framed as between men and women “standing equally,” mirroring the literal meaning of “*jämställdhet*” (Hirdman, 2003). Of these gender equality goals, it is only the sixth that explicitly addresses the character of power relations that define the gender order as a power asymmetry of men over women through the formulation: men’s violence against women needs to end (Regeringen, 2025b). This has made me wonder: How can we be norm critical when the norm is invisible? However, beyond this, the maintenance of gender inequality problem constructions as between men and women, boys and girls is exclusionary because it does not problematize the gendered inequalities faced by intersex or nonbinary people, making their lived embodied experiences unproblematic. When gender inequalities are invisible or unproblematic, power-over facilitates domination by limiting the possibilities for gender equality work. This means that recognizing these problems is not impossible, but constrained. For instance, in Article II, preschool teachers noted and problematized the absence of gendered identities beyond the binary. And in Article IV, some preschool teachers resisted this exclusion by creating a sense of comfort in undoing gender through dresses. Nevertheless, it limits the possibilities by not making the problems explicit.

Although the National Preschool Curriculum [Lpfö, 2025] has become increasingly intersectional, it echoes broader policy gaps, for instance, in the Discrimination Act (SFS 2008:567). This is because Lpfö 2025 omits several dimensions of identity that shape children’s everyday lived embodied experiences—most notably race/skin color and social class. These silences contradict the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which includes race and skin color. And, as it turns out, these omissions appear across my research material. For example, as described in Article IV, only one preschool teacher included a wider range of images and materials representing Black people. Such silences reproduce hegemonic whiteness as an unmarked norm, limiting intersectional possibilities for gender equality work (Ahmed, 2007). The exclusion of social class is similar. Heikkilä (2023) has stated that there is a lack of research on social class in relation to preschool education, as well as on the intersection of gender and social class in preschool education more specifically. As I have argued in Chapters Two and Three of this kappa,

social class has been an important power relation shaping the preschool as an institution at the intersection of gender. By pointing out that social class is not problematized in the curriculum, the lack of research in the area suggests that the curriculum may also impact *what* is researched. In Allen's (1999) terms, these exclusions function as a form of power-over by structuring which gender inequalities can be recognized, and which remain inactionable. They illustrate how invisibility operates as a subtle but potent form of power-over (Allen, 1999; Lukes, 1974).

Paradoxically, however, it is these exclusions and contradictions that create openings. They enable preschool teachers' interpretive agency and negotiation, provided they recognize the political implications of interpretation (Mouffe, 2005). In Article II, preschool teachers' embodied and situated gender equality knowledges are shaped through deep structures (Allen, 1999; Haraway, 1988). For instance, in line with Lpfö 2025 and the Education Act (2010:800), occupational professionalism facilitates hierarchies between knowers and knowledges within the preschool (Evetts, 2011). This enables preschool teachers to influence gender equality work more than the majority of other preschool staff through their science-based knowledge. Nevertheless, different lived and embodied experiences across preschool staff can challenge possibilities for gender equality work if the preschool has not established productive ways to negotiate their situated knowledges. These results underscore the continued importance that Svaleryd (2002) argued for early on: an increase in "knowledge about the educator's own position and scope as a gendered actor within the preschool's gender regime" (p. 46). The preschool's organizational history further constrains who is expected to be a preschool teacher (as illustrated in Chapter 3) and who is seen as competent in gender equality issues. This means that some people are questioned about whether they can do preschool teaching or know about gender equality, including men and racialized people. These dynamics disadvantage men locally within the public-sector gendered organization (Connell, 2006) but disadvantage women more broadly, showing they are still expected to be preschool teachers. Yet these very dynamics show how preschool teachers can use power-to and power-with—leveraging professional knowledge, theoretical grounding, and the mandate itself—to influence gender equality work, echoing Ball's (1993) argument that policy is shaped through struggle in practice rather than derived directly from text.

Building on this further, Articles III and IV focus on how opposition enacts power-over through power dynamics and sustains the gender order (Allen, 1999; Verloo, 2018a). In Article III, my analysis shows how multiple actors—including preschool teachers, preschool staff, children, parents, and societal actors—do opposition (Verloo, 2018a). Active opposition often aligns with anti-feminist and anti-gender rhetoric, while passive opposition reproduces power-over subtly, often going unnoticed. Across Articles II–IV, gender equality work becomes impossible when opposition is accepted or left unchallenged—especially when comfort, neutrality, and consensus are prioritized. This enables conformity to the existing gender order. Article IV demonstrates how power-over sustains cultures

where dresses are girl-coded, thereby rendering boys' dress-wearing problematic and reinforcing hierarchies that subordinate girls, femininity, homosexuality, and nonbinary exploration. This sustains heteronormativity (Butler, 1993; Butler, 2004).

Yet, the cultures in preschools are actively negotiated between a variety of actors. For instance, in Article III, preschool teachers who ignore opposition and defend, and even hide gender equality work, use power-to and power-with to make it possible. This is because defending and hiding gender equality work can shield its possibility by not submitting to domination. Defending it against opposition can even strengthen collective commitment, for instance, when preschool teachers educate parents and children. Relatedly, ignoring opposition is a way to persevere with gender equality work without letting the source of opposition undermine it. This shows that Luke's (1974) top-down perspective, which highlights silence, also applies within everyday power dynamics. Similarly, in Article IV, preschool teachers employ power-with and power-to approaches to create comfort in meaningful differentiation through princess and girl culture, making it possible to redo and undo gender (Allen, 1990; Simmel, 1957). This is another way of shielding gender equality work from opposition.

Taken together, the four articles show the complexities of preschool teachers' relational power in shaping the (im)possibilities of gender equality work. Power relations are enacted through policy contradictions, silences, situated knowledges, opposition, and heteronormativity. This is how power-over shapes the (im)possibilities of preschool teachers' relational power in gender equality work (Allen, 1999). It makes it impossible to do gender equality work when gender mandate exclusions and contradictions facilitate unresolved disagreements on how to do gender equality work, when opposition is accepted, and when meaningful differentiation causes discomfort. These dynamics make power-over visible and contestable, suggesting that gender equality work is impossible if understood only as pedagogy. These four articles show how enactments of power-to and power-with shift power dynamics and *challenge* power-over and power relations that characterize the gender order through leveraging professional responsibility, conflict management strategies, ignoring opposition, defending gender equality work, and making meaningful differentiation feel comfortable. Gender equality work is possible when preschool teachers mobilize power-to and power-with to interpret, negotiate, resist, and transform power dynamics as a challenge to power-over (Allen, 1999). These forms of resistance, intentional or not, are relational and depend on acting within power relations rather than outside them.

## Reshaping the (Im)possibilities—The Contributions of this Research

### Theoretical Contributions

I have made several theoretical contributions in this dissertation. Broadly, I have suggested a shift from pedagogical to feminist sociological understandings of gender equality work in preschools. This entailed moving beyond preschool pedagogues' challenges with

the pedagogy of gender equality work as *the* reason gender inequality is (re)produced in preschools. In this shift, I have relied on Swedish exceptionalism (Alm et al., 2021; de los Reyes et al., 2002; Shierup & Åhlund, 2011; Habel, 2012) as a key analytical background, as it constructs an image of Swedish gender equality as an exemplar in Sweden and the world. This, I have argued, makes a range of political struggles invisible, including those that lead to the reproduction of gender inequalities in and through the preschools. One of my primary assumptions is that gender inequalities are reproduced in the deep structural conditions of society, of which the preschool is an arena (Haraway, 1988) and the gender equality work they are responsible for. My focus has consequently been on relational power.

In taking a critical approach to theory, I have contributed to feminist theory, queer theory, and oppositional studies by extending Allen's (1999) feminist conception of power in multiple ways. Most generally, I have problematized the focus on men's power over women and have shifted the focus toward norms, which is arguably a "queering" of this tool by detaching it from the gender binary. In doing so, I developed and adapted the focus of this power perspective to be, first, one of domination, which benefits those who are identified and identify according to hegemonic norms, allowing the enactment of power *over* those who deviate from the norms, thereby subordinating them. In other words, it does not have to be a person who benefits from this domination who enacts power-over. The people who benefit are those who are validated by deep structures, because of their race, gender, sexuality, et cetera, which gives them privilege, meaning social and, often, material benefits. This frames them as normal or invisible (Lukes, 1974). I have adapted the second interest as the power *to* react, to domination as an individual who deviates from the norm and experiences subordination, or those who are allied and leverage their own privilege against the norm. I adapted the third interest as the collective power *with* others against domination by those who may also deviate from the norm and experience subordination, or who are allied and leverage their own privilege against the norm. I have also added the distinction between power relations and power dynamics to this understanding, in order to more clearly delineate, during analysis, the difference between the structuring features of power and those enacted through individual and collective agency.

Allen's (1999) feminist theory of power encompasses concepts that are frequently used and contested across multiple social scientific disciplines, including domination, agency, resistance, and solidarity. However, Allen (1999) does not connect power to opposition as I have in this research. In connecting opposition to power-over, I have been able to nuance how power-over is enacted by adopting Verloo's (2018a) concept of varieties of opposition. In specific contribution to feminist theory and opposition studies, this framing builds upon Verloo's (2018b) conceptualization of opposition within the discursive dimension of power, connecting it to situated knowledges shaped by lived and embodied experiences that give rise to affect in relation to materiality. This framing highlights the role of situated knowledges in structuring the possibilities for gender in relation to gender equality, as well as the forms of opposition that emerge against them. With this

framing, I have thereby extended Allen's (1999) feminist conception of power to analyze material objects, including dresses, as sites of the enactment of power-over, power-to, and power-with.

In further contribution to gender theory, feminist studies, and queer theory, I contribute material and affective dimensions to the ongoing debate on redoing, undoing, and doing gender. I achieve this by demonstrating how dresses can either catalyze embodied comfort or discomfort, thereby mediating gendered (im)possibilities. To achieve this, I slightly modify the definitions of redoing and undoing gender, aligning them with concepts that highlight the lived and embodied nature of gender through the concept of meaningful differentiation, which is a theoretical development of Simmel's (1957) theorization of differentiation. By calling it meaningful, I emphasize how it has consequences in various ways that shape a person's life chances. It means that there will be a reaction to the differentiation. So, rather than framing differentiation as something to strive for, as Simmel (1957) does, the focus of my conceptualization could go either way, depending on how others receive it.

### Methodological Contributions

Through this dissertation, I have also made a qualitative methodological contribution by introducing RSI (Rådesjö, 2025a). I have put this interview approach to work in this research by using it to shift the power dynamics of the interview situation. This was an ethical choice to make preschool teachers more comfortable and, in turn, to open up a different way of empirically knowing about gender equality work. The preschool teachers who participated in the RSIs constructed multiple, sometimes contradictory, perspectives. They laughed, disagreed, learned from each other, exchanged ideas, and experiences. This interview approach is one I hope will encourage other researchers to think about how we come to know and how our coming to know can be challenged. From my stance against the objectification of preschool teachers, this method has allowed me to reposition myself in the research as someone who wants to learn from those who can teach me.

### Empirical Contributions

Each article outlines the explicit and more detailed empirical contributions. However, my dissertation generally contributes empirically to feminist sociology, particularly within the areas of early childhood education, gender and sexuality, work, organizations and occupations, emotions, and political sociology. I do this in fulfilling the aims of my research by demonstrating that gender equality work is not linear or apolitical, but rather enacted through negotiation, opposition, and resistance as preschool teachers navigate the contradictions in policy, practice, and everyday relations. This means that gender equality work requires more than pedagogical practice. I have also moved away from focusing solely on the problems in this work by offering detailed empirical insights into both the possibilities and impossibilities of preschool teachers' relational power in shaping gender equality work, shedding light on challenges *and* how they are overcome.

In contributing to this empirical focus, I have conducted a critical policy analysis of the gender equality mandate, which has not been previously undertaken. This is a more structural perspective, something Heikkilä (2023) has argued is needed. I also compellingly demonstrate how preschool teachers' knowledges are constructed in a variety of ways that complicate gender equality work. These results complicate the knowledge-deficit arguments in some previous research and government reports. Additionally, I show how preschool teachers', preschool staff's, parents', and children's opposition is managed through strategies of accepting, ignoring, hiding, and defending, and how affective and material conditions shape what becomes possible to live and experience in relation to gender subjectivity. The focus on opposition in relation to gender equality work of Swedish preschools has not been carried out before either. In this focus, I have pushed this research beyond pedagogization (Axelsson & Frödén, 2021).

Together, these findings show that gender equality work unfolds through dynamic, relational processes rooted in power relations and negotiated through power dynamics. Tallberg Broman (2002) wrote early on that, "[Gender equality] has been transformed from an ideological question connected to power and resource division to a pedagogical question, where every preschool teacher and every pedagogue is responsible." (p. 166). In connection with what has been troubled in earlier research, and by further troubling these issues, I have gotten to the heart of Tallberg Broman's problematization by showing that the focus on gender equality work as a pedagogical question does decontextualize preschool from the broader and specific structural conditions in Sweden, and preschool teachers' role in this context. Directions for future research are outlined in the articles, but broadly, power relations and dynamics should continue to be critically explored in relation to gender equality work, especially in relation to parents and other preschool staff.

## Conclusions and Directions for the Future

In this dissertation, I have critically explored preschool teachers' relational power in shaping the (im)possibilities of gender equality work in Swedish preschools. Drawing on a critical feminist ethnographic approach and an eclectic theoretical framework, I have shown that power relations both enable and constrain gender equality work—shaping what can be known, said, and done, while also creating openings for transformation. Power dynamics can be used to challenge the field of possibilities when preschool teachers leverage their professional responsibility in leading the interpretation of the gender equality mandate; power dynamics can be shifted through conflict between situated knowledges of the interpreters, and when power-with and power-to are used to thrust subordination perpetuated by opposition. By “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016), I have not used my dissertation to resolve contradictions but dwell in them. The compilation of articles that comprise this dissertation shows that the (im)possibilities of gender equality work *are* the product of those very tensions.

Making gender equality work possible is not about eliminating the enactment of power, but about reconfiguring, or shifting, it relationally, materially, discursively, affectively, and collectively. This means that gender equality work is neither straightforward nor linear but is constantly made and unmade within the deep structural order. My results point to the instability of gender equality work in preschools, even in a seemingly gender equal nation. I argue that differences in interpretations of the gender equality mandate can be understood in light of situated knowledges, fostering tension and even conflict in the collective interpretation of the mandate. At the same time, what is unproblematized has political consequences (Mouffe, 2005). Prior to this research, the creative strategies preschool teachers employ outside of pedagogy in the face of opposition have been overlooked. These strategies, like ignoring and defending, are key sites of resistance in reproducing gender inequalities. In line with Eidevald (2009), it is also essential to note that gender inequalities are not always deliberately perpetuated; they are often unintentionally reproduced, even through well-intentioned acts. This highlights the important conclusion that intent is not all that matters; impact matters too.

Returning to Ahmed (2017), the preschool teachers who participated in my dissertation have demonstrated how small acts can trouble a variety of surfaces. The gender equality mandate is more complicated than it first appears. The preschool as a public sector gendered organization is not just “cozy and cute”, as one of the preschool teachers in this research said. Gender equality work is more than pedagogy—the preschool is an arena for opposition. And a dress, on its surface, may seem unproblematic—until it is on the wrong body. Even in Sweden, despite all the indices and progress, there is much to do, and the terrain is shifting. As anti-gender and anti-feminist opposition have become mainstream—and as teaching so-called “gender ideology” becomes illegal in some parts of the world, it is important to remember what is at stake. The rights achieved by feminist movements and politics have been shaped by the efforts of individuals tackling various gender inequalities from their own partial perspectives. (Haraway, 1988). What is possible now because of feminist action can be made impossible again (Ahmed, 2017). This is already happening in Sweden (EIGE, 2024; Lane & Jordansson, 2020).

Gloria Steinem (2005), the self-identified hopeaholic, might say something like: Hope is not lost. But, through my focus on what is possible in this dissertation, I see that it is not a platitude. It is like Ahmed (2017) says, by causing some friction, some agitation, some trouble, “each movement [makes] another possible, another ripple, outward, reaching...” (p. 3). I have constructed this dissertation through feminist action by shifting the dominant approach from pedagogy, knowledge deficits, and preschool teacher blaming to understanding gender equality work in Swedish preschools as a sociologically rich arena for gender equality politics, where meanings and doings are in negotiation; a place where opposition and resistance collide; a place where gender is undone and redone. I have slowed down the movement in this chapter, but I have not stopped it. This is me bellowing out to anyone who will listen, the words of June Jordan (2002): “We are the ones we have been waiting for!” This dissertation is power-with. Stay with the trouble. Keep up the movement.

# Svensk sammanfattning

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## Problem, syfte och forskningsfrågor

På ytan verkar jämställdheten i Sverige vara exceptionell – ett rykte som sträcker sig även till förskolan, länge hyllade internationellt för sina progressiva tillvägagångssätt. Från Alva Myrdals förespråkande på 1930-talet, via Barnstugeutredningen på 1970-talet, till förskoleplanens formella jämställdhetsmandat 1998, har idealet om en jämställd förskola blivit djupt inbäddat i den svenska självbilden. Inflytelserika pedagogiska modeller och internationellt erkända förskolor som Egalia och Nicolaigården har förstärkt denna bild och framställt Sverige som en global banbrytare. Men under den polerade ytan av "svensk exceptionalism" finns en mer komplex verklighet. Tidigare forskning och statliga utredningar under de senaste två decennierna har upprepade gånger pekat på brister, missuppfattningar och misslyckanden i genomförandet av jämställdhetsmandatet. Problemen har ofta lokaliserats till pedagogernas otillräckliga kunskaper eller bristfälliga pedagogiska utförande.

Med utgångspunkt i, men också genom att problematisera denna omfattande forskningsmängd, närmar jag mig dessa långvariga "problem" på ett annat sätt. Jag argumenterar för att svensk exceptionalism fungerar som en yta som osynliggör andra anledningar till att dessa problem finns. Snarare än att betrakta förskollärare passiva eller apolitiska, ser jag dem som politiska subjekt med inflytande över – och begränsade av – djupa strukturella maktrelationer (Allen, 1999). Mitt syfte är därför att kritiskt utforska förskollärares relationella makt att forma (o)möjligheterna i jämställdhetsarbetet i svenska förskolor. Ett kritiskt feministiskt etnografiskt tillvägagångssätt, med utgångspunkt i olika empiriska material och kritiska teorier, har format denna avhandling. Mitt specifika syfte med denna feministiska sociologiska forskning är att kritiskt utforska hur maktrelationer begränsar, möjliggör och (om)formar (o)möjligheterna för jämställdhetsarbete i svenska förskolor, samt hur förskollärare förhandlar, motsätter sig och (re)producerar dessa villkor i sin vardagliga yrkesutövning. Forskningsfrågorna som guidar mig är:

- I. På vilka sätt möjliggör, begränsar eller (om)formar maktrelationer (o)möjligheter för förskollärares jämställdhetsarbete i svenska förskolor?
- II. Hur förhandlar, motsätter sig, motarbetar eller (åter)producerar förskollärare (o)möjligheter genom maktdynamik i sitt dagliga jämställdhetsarbete?
- III. När är jämställdhetsarbete i förskolan (o)möjligt, och varför?

Eftersom detta är en sammanläggningsavhandling är dessa syften mycket breda. Mer specifika syften beskrivs i artiklarna I–IV.

## Bakgrund

Jag grundar avhandlingen i feministisk sociologi genom att rama in (o)jämslällldhet som en del av Sveriges djupa strukturella ordning. Jag spårar hur möjligheter till (o)jämslällldhet historiskt sett har skapats genom sammanflätade krafter – patriarkat, rasism, klassism, kapitalism, nyliberalism, neokolonialism – och visar hur feministisk kamp, politik och kulturella berättelser omväxlande har främjat och begränsat förändring. Jag skriver detta som en feministisk återberättelse och följer kampen från kvinnors rättigheter till jämslällldhet. Mina argument i kapitel 2 ger en kontext till och motiverar den första forskningsfrågan.

Då ursprungsberättelser ibland sträcker sig tillbaka till vikingatiden, varnar jag för att ett sådant tänkande essentialiserar jämslällldhet som i sig “svensk”. I stället belyser jag protofeministiska interventioner (t. ex. Bremers, Hertha), rösträttsaktivism och debatter i mitten av 1900-talet (Moberg, Myrdal) som ledde till reformer. Den andra feministiska vågen på 1970-talet populariserade jämslällldhet – bokstavligen att stå “jämte” – som ett konsensusorienterat koncept. Det dolde maktrelationer men visade sig vara politiskt mobiliserande. Olof Palmes tal 1972 markerade en vändpunkt i politiken: utökning av barnomsorg, åtgärder mot diskriminering och 1979 års jämslällldhetslag (senare införlivad i 2008 års diskrimineringslag).

Jag undersöker vidare hur jämslällldhet blev centralt för Sveriges nationella varumärke och exceptionella självbild – en “god”, omtänksam och tolerant moralisk standard som exporterades genom välfärdsframgångar, gender equality index och den (numera övergivna) feministiska utrikespolitiken. Ändå döljer denna föreställning kontinuerliga klyftor mellan politik och levda, förkroppsligade erfarenheter i form av ojämlika vårdbördor, en könssegregerad arbetsmarknad, låga löner i feminiserade arbetssektorer, fattigdom bland äldre kvinnor och höga våldsnivåer mot kvinnor (den “nordiska paradoxen”). Nyliberal omstrukturering har ytterligare urholkat de kollektiva grundvalarna och omformulerat jämslällldhet till individuella val, samtidigt som betydelsen av jämslällldhet skiljer sig åt mellan partier, institutioner och inom civilsamhället. En ökande anti-genuspolitik – förstärkt av högeraktörer – har riktat in sig på feminism och genuspedagogik, vilket intensifierat och polariserat samtida spänningar.

I kapitel 3 ger jag kontext till och motiverar den första och andra forskningsfrågan. Historiskt sett uppstod tidiga barnomsorgsinstitutioner som ett sätt för eliten att få kontroll över arbetarklassen genom att uppföstra deras barn på ett “bättre sätt”. Detta var alltså ett moraliserande projekt. Senare, genom Fröbel- och Myrdal-inspirerade reformer, började förskolan expandera. Det innebar stora förändringar för en professionalisering för de kvinnor som jobbade i förskolan. Efter att ha integrerats i skolsystemet (genom 1998 års läroplan), blev förskolan en explicit aktör i jämslällldhetspolitiken. Dagens blandade kommunala och privata system är offentligt finansierat men format av marknadslögi, vilket har skapat olika villkor för både barn och förskollärare. Förskollärarkåren, som till en överväldigande del utgörs av kvinnor, har genomgått en betydande professionalisering (universitetsexamina, certifiering) parallellt med ihållande devalvering av deras yrkesstatus, personalbrist, hög arbetsbelastning och osäkra förhållanden. Mot denna

bakgrund har förskollärare organiserat sig (t. ex. Förskoleupproppet) för att kräva mindre barngrupper, bättre förutsättningar och skyddad arbetstid för planering.

Läroplanen föreskriver att ett jämställdhetsarbete ska utföras, vilket har lett till pedagogiska insatser och forskning. Tidigare litteratur har ofta dokumenterat hur vardagliga arbetsmetoder kan reproducera normer (t.ex. genom olika förväntningar på pojkar och flickor eller vårdrutiner som naturaliserar kön), och i stor utsträckning härlett "misslyckanden" enbart till pedagogiken. Denna avhandling fokuserar i stället på makt: det vill säga att förskollärarnas övertygelser, identiteter och handlingskraft formas av bredare sociopolitiska krafter, nyliberal styrning och offentlig opposition. Högprofilerade kontroverser (t.ex. Egalia) illustrerar hur förskolor blir symboliska slagfält där könsfientliga diskurser ifrågasätter jämställdhetsinsatser.

Min argumentation ser svensk jämställdhet som ett pågående, omtvistat projekt, inte en bestämd prestation. Förskolor är centrala platser för strukturella maktrelationers uttryck i vardagliga maktdynamiker. Förskollärare har historiskt agerat som jämställdhetspionjärer och frontlinjearbetare inom strukturella begränsningar; deras praktik både speglar och omformar bredare förhandlingar om genus, omsorgsarbete, nationalism och (o)jämställdhet. Efterföljande analyser i avhandlingen påvisar hur dessa dynamiker möjliggör, begränsar och förändrar lärares dagliga jämställdhetsarbete.

## Teori

I den här avhandlingen är teorin en aktiv partner – en abduktiv lins som förfinas genom att jag rör mig fram och tillbaka mellan empiriska "översraskningar" och teoretiska koncept, men även ett sätt att orientera mig. Jag har byggt ett eklektiskt ramverk av kritiska teorier med feministisk grund. Utifrån Amy Allens (1999) feministiska uppfattning bygger avhandlingens teoretiska grund på en syn på makt som relationell och produktiv. Jag skiljer djupa strukturer (relativt stabila samhällsformationer som sprider maktrelationer) från maktdynamiker (makt utövad i vardagliga situationer). Inom detta ramverk samexisterar makt-över (dominans), makt-till (individuell handling) och makt-med (kollektiv handling) och formar ett skiftande "fält av möjligheter". Jag utvidgar Allen (1999) genom att addera en queer-dimension till hennes verktygslåda. Ojämställdheter uppstår inte bara mellan män och kvinnor utan även mellan män och kvinnor i relation till andra könade identiteter. Utöver detta lägger jag till hur ojämställdheter sker inom grupper av till exempel kvinnor genom rasbaserade, klassrelaterade och sexualiserade ordningar (Crenshaw, 1989).

Kunskap sedd som situerad, det vill säga lokaliserad, partiell och politisk, förankrar epistemologin. Subjekt är bärare av normer både materiellt och diskursivt och när människor avviker från hegemoniska normer renderas dessa "ur spel", vilket synliggör strukturer. Detta betyder att normer också är levda och förkroppsligade. Genus är både struktur och praktik: ett samkonstituerande, förkroppsligat och diskursivt "görande" (West & Zimmerman, 1987), utfört genom iterabilitet (Butler, 1993) och alltid i samspel med andra dimensioner av våra identiteter som formas och formar djupa strukturer (Crenshaw, 1989). Heteronormativitet organiserar begriplighet och privilegier. Meningsfull differentiering – handlingar som utmanar heteronormativitet kan förskjuta möjligheternas

fält, där “göra om” genus innebär en delutmaning medan att “ogöra” genus bestrider heteronormativiteten fullt ut, något som både provocerar fram motstånd.

Lönearbete är en viktig plats där dessa dynamiker både tar och får form. Förskolor är offentliga organisationer inbäddade i en könssegregerad arbetsmarknad där feminiserad omsorg historiskt sett har haft låg status. Professionaliseringsprojekt som syftar till att höja förskoleundervisningens status omskriver ofta normen för den “ideala arbetaren” och kan därmed reproducera hierarkier, även om de också öppnar upp för makt-till- och makt-med-strategier. Jämställdhetsarbete definieras som ansträngningar för att eliminera ojämlikheter mellan könen, delvis pedagogiska men också organisatoriska och politiska. Policydokument – särskilt förskolans jämställdhetsmandat – både möjliggör och avgränsar praktiken, och positionerar förskollärare som förändringsagenter. Detta gör det möjligt för jämställdhetsarbetet att antingen avpolitiserar och reduceras till administrativ rutin, eller politiserar och göras till ett kall.

Konceptuellt fungerar “jämställdhet” som en flytande, tom beteckning; dess betydelser uppfattas olika beroende på aktör och sammanhang, vilket genererar en “af-fektiv röra.” Jag använder Lorbers (2012) schema (reform-, motstånds-, upprorsfeminismer) för att jämföra hur olika feministiska teorier formulerar de problem de vill belysa. Men feministiska teorier säger även mycket om vad motståndet är, till exempel i form av postfeminism, antifeminism och antigenderism. En ständig sociologisk fråga kopplad till de teoretiska verktygen i denna avhandling är: vem gynnas?

Sammantaget utgår jag i denna avhandling från teori som både verktyg och praktik: den orienterar, och jag genererar koncept genom mitt arbete med forskningsmaterialet (t.ex. meningsfull differentiering). Denna kontinuerliga konversation mellan teori och forskningsmaterial knyter samman artiklarna som ingår i avhandlingen.

## Metodologi

Avhandlingens fyra delar bärs upp av kvalitativ metodologi. Jag använder ett system av metoder—kritisk polycystudie, semistrukturerade intervjuer, research subject interviewing (RSI), deltagandeobservation och reflexiv tematisk analys—som vävs samman genom en kritisk feministisk etnografisk ansats (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1994; Valocchi, 2005). I stället för fyra fristående metoder fungerar dessa som ihopkopplade verktyg för att följa hur maktrelationer utövas diskursivt, institutionellt, materiellt och affektivt samt hur förskollärare navigerar i detta i det vardagliga arbetet via maktdynamiker (Allen, 1999).

Forskningsdesignen är förankrad i etablerade kvalitativa traditioner men avvisar “science as usual” och dess maskulinistiska logiker (Harding, 1991). Med dessa metoder ställer jag maktkritiska frågor, centrerar marginaliserade röster och behandlar kunskap som situerad och partiell (Haraway, 1988, 1997). Eftersom kvalitativa metoder kan riskera objektifiering förskjuts tyngdpunkten från forskning *på* till forskning *med* förskollärarna som utför kvinnodominerat arbete (Compton et al., 2018; Lorber, 2012). Metodval anses därför som oupplösligt förbundna med forskarens position—eftersom forskaren är det primära “instrumentet” (Rönblom, 2011; Lykke, 2010).

Begreppet "kritisk utforskning" fungerar som en orienterande hållning: en abduktiv, iterativ praktik som rör sig mellan teori, materialgenerering och analys, med fokus på makt och nyfiken, hoppfull skepsis inför emancipatoriska (o)möjligheter (Duckworth, 2005). Den kritiska feministiska etnografiska ansatsen definieras av ett intellektuellt arbete som konstruerar kunskap i relation till forskningsfältet, erkänner partiella sanningar och använder utförliga beskrivningar som binder vardaglig praktik till maktrelationer (Rooke, 2010; Geertz, 1994). En "etnografisk attityd"—öppenhet, uppmärksamhet, ansvar—guidar mötena med människor, dokument och fotografier (Haraway, 1997).

Varje metod anpassas till denna ram. Den kritiska policystudien använder Ulmers tolkning av diffraktion för att analysera förskolans jämställdhetsmandat utifrån flera feministiska teorier, vilket i sin tur vidgar de analytiska möjligheterna genom att fokusera på effekter, interferenser och exkluderings (Ulmer, 2016; Barad, 2007). Bacchis "What is the Problem Represented to be?" omformas genom att ersätta "representation" med "konstruktion" och "oproblematisk" med "(o)möjlig"—i linje med att se "jämställdhet" som en flytande, tom beteckning (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2018; Lorber, 2012).

Dataurvalet är strategiskt för att inrymma olika sociala miljöer och könsmässig mångfald (Tunström & Wang, 2019). Semistrukturerade intervjuer ramar in fältarbetet genom två faser: de ger möjlighet till jämförbarhet och lämnar samtidigt utrymme för deltagarstyrning och följdfrågor för ett djupare meningsskapande (Holstein & Gubrium, 2002). RSI introduceras för att mildra intervjuens maktasymmetrier. Det innebär att förskollärare samtalar i par utan forskarens närvaro utifrån vinjetter och diskussionsfrågor, vilket genererar kollegial kunskap och nya frågevägar (Rådesjö, 2025a). Deltagande observation betonar "deep hanging out" som en engagerad närvaro snarare än en tidsmässigt lång dito. Jag har tagit fältanteckningar och fotografier av miljöerna (utan barnen) som minnesstöd. Dokumentation såsom exempelvis planeringsdokument har använts som kontextuell fond.

Analysen har skett via reflexiv tematisk analys (Braun & Clarke, 2022) - det vill säga utvecklats genom ett utforskande av materialet via transkription och omläsning; semantisk och latent kodning; temabyggnad med teoristöd; och skrivande som analytisk praktik. Intervju- och observationsmaterial korsläses för att identifiera mönster (t.ex. kring klänningar) samtidigt som den sociala verklighetens "oordning" erkänns (Law, 2004). Teori är närvarande men hålls rörlig; när ramen inte räcker utvecklas begrepp som svar på materialet (Hart, 2022).

Etiken är integrerad snarare än tillagd, formulerad genom Barads "ethico-onto-epistemology" om den oupplösliga kopplingen mellan etik, ontologi och epistemologi (Barad, 2007). Jag har fått godkännande av Etikprövningsmyndigheten att genomföra denna forskning. Jag har inhämtat formellt godkännande, samt prioriterat samtycke från deltagarna, säkerställt konfidentialitet och deltagarna har haft tillgång till sitt eget material. Vidare visar den valda metodiken extraktiv praxis (Reinharz, 1983; Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). Min positionalitet—som mexikansk-amerikan i Sverige med aktivistisk hållning—beaktas som en som en etisk och analytisk resurs, inte som en partiskhet som måste neutraliseras (Mills, 1959; Anzaldúa, 1987; Ahmed, 2010, 2017; Puwar, 2004; Lorde, 1977). Aktivism förstås som ansvarstagande vetenskaplig praktik, i linje med forskning som visar

att forskaraktivism kan gynna både vetenskap och samhälle när flera marginaliserade behov sätts i fokus (Causadias et al., 2024; Rogers et al., 2024). Självreflektion och löpande prövning av egen värdegrund är centralt (Wojnicka & Nowicka, 2023; Rådesjö, 2018).

Sammanfattningsvis utgör metodologin ett relationellt, maktmedvetet system som innehåller en policystudie för diskursiva strukturer, semistrukturerade intervjuer för meningskapande, RSI för att rubba forskarcentrering och skapa olika möjligheter för kunskapsskapande samt observation för att placera allt inom en materiell-affektiv praktik. Tillsammans möjliggör metoderna en studie på flera nivåer av hur förskollärares relationella makt formar (o)möjligheterna för jämställdhetsarbete i svenska förskolor.

## **Sammanfattning av artiklarna I-IV**

De fyra artiklar som utgör denna sammanläggningsavhandling undersöker tolkande, organisatoriska, politiska och materiella (o)möjligheter för jämställdhetsarbete i svenska förskolor. De visar hur motsägelser inom policys, situerad kunskap, levda erfarenheter, motstånd, emotioner och materiella objekt samverkar i att forma (o)möjligheterna för jämställdhetsarbete. Det lägger grunden för avhandlingens slutsatser där de empiriska resultaten och teoretiska insikterna integreras i en bredare kritisk analys.

### **Artikel I: Gender Inequality Problems and their (Im)possibilities: Critically Exploring Swedish Preschools' Gender Equality Mandate**

Denna artikel undersöker hur ojämställdhetsproblem konstrueras inom den svenska förskolans jämställdhetsmandat och vilka tolkningsmässiga (o)möjligheter detta innebär. Till skillnad från tidigare forskning, som betonat förskollärares svårigheter att tolka uppdraget, riktas fokus här mot hur själva policyramverket gör tolkningen utmanande. Förankrad i feministisk politisk teori begreppsliiggör jag jämställdhet som en tom och flytande beteckning (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Žižek, 1989) och analyserar konstellationen av styrdokument – fem versioner av den svenska förskolans nationella läroplan tillsammans med diskrimineringslagen, skollagen och barnkonventionen - intertextuellt. Genom en Bacchi-inspirerad analys med WPR?, läst diffraktivt (Ulmer, 2016), visar jag att dessa texter producerar motsägelsefulla problemkonstruktioner. De förlitar sig på binära könskategorier och problematiserar heteronormativitet, samtidigt som de utesluter icke-binära, intersexuella, rasifierade och klassrelaterade identiteter. Dessa motsägelser gör uppdraget inkonsekvent: det kräver handlingar som riskerar att reproducera ojämställdhet samtidigt som det syftar till att motverka densamma. Jag argumenterar för att dessa spänningar ändå kan förstås som öppningar för en professionellt tolkande handlingsförmåga, där förskollärare kan fylla uppdraget med olika betydelser beroende på deras förskolas kontext och behov. Min slutsats är att motsägelser och exkluderingar är oundvikliga, men att förskollärares professionella omdöme spelar en avgörande politisk roll i att forma jämställdhetsarbetets (o)möjligheter.

### **Artikel II: Not A Bunch Of Politically Correct Ms. Prysseliuses: How Preschool Teachers' Gender Equality Knowledge is (Re)shaped in the Swedish Preschool**

Denna artikel undersöker hur förskollärares situerade kunskaper (Haraway, 1988) om jämställdhet (om)formas utifrån deras arbete i förskolan som en könad organisation inom den offentliga sektorn (Connell, 2006). Studien relateras till forskning och policydebatter som framställer förskollärare som antingen okunniga eller som "duktiga flickor" - alltså som lydiga förmedlare av statlig ideologi som enligt Ebba Busch är som Prussiluskan. Jag argumenterar i stället för att deras kunskaper och subjektiviteter formas inom organisatoriska strukturer präglade av professionalisering, hierarkisering och normativa föreställningar om kvinnlighet. Med utgångspunkt i två faser av semistrukturerade intervjuer, RSI och deltagande observation använder jag Allens (1999) maktteori för att analysera hur förskollärare navigerar och omformar maktrelationer. Deras förståelse av jämställdhet begränsas av professionella hierarkier som värderar teoretisk kunskap högre än erfarenhetsbaserad, liksom av könade, rasifierade och klassrelaterade stereotyper om vem en förskollärare är. Samtidigt kan dessa villkor också möjliggöra insikt – till exempel när manliga lärare upplever marginalisering eller när rasifierade lärare kämpar för legitimitet och därigenom politiserar sitt jämställdhetsarbete. Förskollärares tolkningar skiljer sig åt beroende på om jämställdhetsarbetet borde fokusera på likhet eller olikhet, utmana eller bevara könsordningen, samt om kön ses som biologiskt eller socialt konstruerat. Dessa skillnader försvårar gemensamma organisatoriska förhållningssätt men synliggör samtidigt jämställdhet som ett politiskt omstritt fält. Jag drar slutsatsen att utmaningarna i jämställdhetsarbetet inte kan reduceras till problem kopplade till kunskapsbrist. De uppstår snarare genom levda, och förkroppsligade, erfarenheter och strukturella maktodynamiker som formar hur lärare tolkar och omsätter sitt uppdrag. När förskollärare engagerar sig i produktiva konflikter och kollektiv reflektion blir jämställdhetsarbete möjligt. Artikeln bidrar därmed till en omkonceptualisering av jämställdhetsarbete till något som formas genom professionalisering, levda erfarenheter och organisatorisk makt.

### **Artikel III: "No, She Can't Be the Hulk!": Critically Exploring Opposition to Swedish Preschools' Gender Equality Work and Preschool Teachers' Responses to It**

Denna artikel sätter motstånd mot förskolans jämställdhetsarbete i centrum och placerar det inom ramen för framväxande antigenus- och antifeministiska uppfattningar. Med stöd i Allens (1999) maktbegrepp makt-över, makt-till och makt-med begreppslikt gör jag motstånd som makt-över och maktodynamiker som främjar jämställdhet som makt-till/makt-med. Utifrån 52 intervjuer och observationer med tio förskollärare visar jag att motstånd uppträder både aktivt och passivt från flera aktörer: personal, barn, föräldrar och samhällsliga krafter. Förskollärare kan själva uttrycka passiv opposition genom att hänvisa till tids- eller kunskapsbrist, medan andra aktivt motsätter sig jämställdhetsinitiativ. Föräldrar opponerar sig ofta mot pojkar i kjol eller manliga lärare i omsorgsroller, och politiska diskurser förstärker detta klimat. Lärarna svarar genom att acceptera, ignorera, dölja eller försvara sitt arbete. Acceptans och undvikande reproducerar rådande maktrelationer, medan försvar – grundat i läroplanens uppdrag och professionell etik – utgör makt-med som möjliggör kollektivt handlande. Jag drar slutsatsen att både aktivt och passivt motstånd

reproducerar genusordningen, men att försvar och solidaritet kan omforma handlingssutrymmet. Opposition är således inte ett yttre hinder utan en inbäddad maktrelation som synliggör förskolan som politisk arena.

#### **Artikel IV: Opposing Tough Princesses and Girly-boys: How Dresses Make Doing Gender in Swedish Preschools (Im)possible**

I denna artikel undersöker jag hur klänningar gör det (o)möjligt att göra, göra om och ogöra genus i svenska förskolor genom jämställdhetsarbete. Utifrån ett feministiskt maktperspektiv analyserar jag hur förskollärares erfarenheter och handlingar formar maktdynamiker i relation till klänningar. Studien bygger på 52 intervjuer och observationer av tio förskollärares vardagliga arbete och vägleds av kritiska och queerteoretiska perspektiv som ser görandet av genus som präglat av motstånd mot heteronormativitet. Klänningar ses här som både materiella artefakter och affektiva symboler som väcker känslor av (o)bekvämlighet och därigenom påverkar anpassning eller meningsfull differentiering. Analysen visar hur klänningar blir en aktiv plats där (o)möjligheter tar form genom att framkalla affektiva reaktioner av obehag eller välbehag. I förskolor där klänningar reserveras för flickor uppstår motstånd från föräldrar, barn och personal, vilket ibland leder till att alla utklädningsklänningar tas bort ur leken – i ett fall bytte till och med en pojke förskola. Dessa handlingar reproducerar makt-över och gör det omöjligt att utmana heteronormativitet, vilket i sin tur upprätthåller den könade ordningen. Detta hänger samman med hur meningsfull differentiering kan skapa obehag när pojkar bär klänning. Samtidigt visar analysen att när förskolans klimat främjar ett öppet förhållningssätt, där klänningar omtolkas inom exempelvis prinsess- och flickkulturer, kan makt- till och makt- med användas för att göra om och ogöra genus. På så sätt blir klänningar inte bara en symbol för könsnormer, utan också ett redskap för att omförhandla dem. Artikeln bidrar till teoretiska diskussioner om performativitet och materialitet genom att visa hur affektiva reaktioner på materiella objekt formar könade möjligheter. Den vidareutvecklar även relationella synsätt på makt genom att belysa hur dominans, handlingskraft och solidaritet levs och förhandlas materiellt och affektivt i förskolans vardag.

#### **Diskussion och slutsatser**

Avslutningsvis vill jag, såsom Haraway (2016), “stay with the trouble.” Avhandlingens övergripande syfte har varit att kritiskt undersöka förskollärares relationella makt i hur (o)möjligheter för jämställdhetsarbete formas i svenska förskolor. Genom en kritisk feministisk etnografisk ansats har jag analyserat policydokument, läroplanen för förskolan, fältanteckningar och intervjumaterial från fältarbete i tre faser med 21 förskollärare från sju förskolor i Sverige. Jag har undersökt hur maktrelationer möjliggör, begränsar och formar jämställdhetsarbete, samt hur förskollärare navigerar och förhandlar dessa maktdynamiker i vardagen.

Resultaten visar att maktrelationer både möjliggör och begränsar jämställdhetsarbete genom de motsägelser och uteslutningar som finns i styrdokument och organisationer. Jämställdhetsuppdraget i läroplanen möjliggör att könsskillnader kan problematiseras,

men samtidigt upprätthåller det en könsbinär och heteronormativ ordning. Genom att endast tala om "flickor och pojkar" och "kvinnor och män" osynliggörs intersex-, icke-binära och rasifierade personer liksom klassdimensioner. Denna strukturella blindhet kan reproducera heteronormativitet och vithet som tysta normer – en form av makt-över som gör vissa ojämställdheter otänkbara. Maktrelationer verkar också genom förskolans organisatoriska logik, som hierarkiserar kunskap, yrkesroller, idealet om vem en förskollärare borde vara och förskollärares ideologier. Denna logik formar vem som anses kunna och få utföra jämställdhetsarbete. Män och rasifierade förskollärare möts av tvivel på sin kompetens, vilket både begränsar deras handlingsutrymme och samtidigt skapar erfarenheter som gör dem medvetna om könsmaktens intersektionella mekanismer.

Förskollärare navigerar makt i vardagen genom både aktiva och passiva former av opposition. Motstånd mot jämställdhetsarbete uttrycks genom argument om brist på tid eller kunskap, eller genom att acceptera motståndet från andra aktörer, som föräldrar, kollegor eller barn. Sådan opposition fungerar som passiv makt-över eftersom det fördröjer eller hindrar förändring. Samtidigt använder förskollärare strategier som att försvara, dölja eller ignorera motstånd, vilket istället kan förstås som makt-till och makt-med, eller sätt att bevara handlingsutrymme och skydda jämställdhetsarbetet. I flera förskolor formas lokala "kulturer", där klänningar kodas som "flickmaterial". När dessa tolkas normativt uppstår obehag och exkludering, men i förskolor med öppnare klimat används samma material för att möjliggöra meningsfull differentiering och alternativa sätt att göra genus.

Jämställdhetsarbete blir omöjligt när makt-över gör könsojämlikheter osynliga eller opolitiska, när motstånd mot det accepteras, eller när bekvämlighet och konsensus prioriteras över konflikt. Det är också omöjligt att genomföra fullt ut utifrån skrivningarna i läroplanen eftersom olika pedagogiska metoder, såsom könsneutralitet och normkritik, motsäger varandra. Samtidigt uppstår i sig möjligheter genom motsägelserna. Förskollärare som tolkar uppdraget kritiskt och situerat kan använda sin professionella autonomi för att omförhandla makt. Genom makt-till (individuell handlingskraft) och makt-med (kollektiv solidaritet) kan de skapa lokala tolkningar som gör jämställdhetsarbete möjligt. Möjligheten ligger alltså inte i frånvaron av makt, utan i dess relationella omförhandling.

Denna avhandlings forskningsbidrag är både teoretiskt, metodologiskt och empiriskt. *Teoretiskt* bidrar den genom att förskjuta fokus från pedagogiska till sociologiska perspektiv på jämställdhetsarbete. Jag vidareutvecklar Amy Allens (1999) feministiska makte teori genom att koppla samman makt-över, makt-till och makt-med med opposition och affektiv materialitet, vilket även tar maktbegreppet bortom könsbinariteten. Jag introducerar begreppet meningsfull differentiering—ett koncept som belyser det materiella och emotionella dimensioner av att "ogöra" eller "göra om" genus.

*Metodologiskt* bidrar avhandlingen med skapandet och användandet av RSI – en samtalsbaserad intervjumetod som ändrar maktrelationen mellan forskare och deltagare. Denna metod utförs mellan deltagare och i forskarens frånvaro. Deltagarnas samtal leds av en intervjuguide och intervjun spelas in. Metoden ändrar kunskapsproduktionen i en intervjusituation genom att skifta maktrelationerna från forskare och deltagare till mellan två deltagare i intervjusituationen.

*Empiriskt* visar avhandlingen hur jämställdhetsarbete i förskolan är politiskt och relationellt, inte linjärt eller neutralt. Den visar hur förskollärare verkar som politiska aktörer som både reproducerar och utmanar genusordningen genom vardagliga förhandlingar, affekter och materiella praktiker via deras levda, förkroppsligade erfarenheter.

Jämställdhetsarbete handlar inte om att eliminera makt utan om att omforma. Förskollärare gör jämställdhet möjlig genom att stanna kvar i motsägelserna, möta motstånd med omsorg och solidaritet samt genom att se konflikter som en del av förändringsarbetet. Det är i dessa små rörelser, krusningar, och friktioner som möjligheten till förändring uppstår.

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# Appendices

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## Appendix One

### Informationsbrev till rektor och förskollärare

Hej! Jag heter Megan Rådesjö. Jag är doktorand vid Institutionen för sociologi och arbetsvetenskap (SOCAV) och forskarskolan Centrum för utbildningsvetenskap och lärarforskning (CUL) vid Göteborgs universitet. Anledningen till att jag kontaktar er är för att se om förskolan och frivilliga förskollärare vill delta i mitt avhandlingsprojekt. Den preliminära arbetstiteln på min avhandling är: *Förskollärares roll i genomförandet av läroplanens jämställdhetsmål i Sverige: En etnografisk studie.*

### Bakgrund, Syfte, och Metod

Jämställdhet i förskolan diskuteras ofta i förhållande till läroplanen. Enligt läroplanen ska förskollärarna ha störst ansvar och kompetens i det pedagogiska arbetet. Läroplanen behöver dock tolkas och en central utgångspunkt för denna studie är att jämställdhet kan förstås på många olika sätt. Detta betyder även att jämställdhetsarbetet kan göras på många olika sätt. Dessa olika sätt att förstå och genomföra jämställdhetsarbete kan bero på många saker, t.ex. på hur vi själva har upplevt jämställdhet och/eller ojämställdhet. Därför tillfrågas förskollärare att delta i denna studie som avser att öka kunskapen om förskollärarnas unika och olika roller i implementering och genomförande av jämställdhetsarbete i förskolan. Specifikt är syftet att undersöka hur förskollärare tolkar och använder läroplanen, men också att förstå hur de själva relaterar till detta jämställdhetsarbete.

Denna studie är kvalitativ och utformad som en etnografisk studie vilket innebär att intervjuer och observationer ingår som en del i materialinsamlingen. Det innebär att jag önskar intervjua förskollärare och ibland kommer att finnas med i förskolans verksamhet eller vara involverad i aktiviteter som förskollärarna bjuder in mig till. Förskollärarna arbetar på som vanligt med den enda skillnaden att jag ibland finns med. Förskollärarna behöver delta i intervjuer och perioder av observation. Detta sker genom tre intervjuer på ca 45-60 minuter. Jag räknar vidare med minst 3-4 helarbetsdagens observationer per deltagare. Fokus är inte på barnen och inga uppgifter som skulle kunna användas för att identifiera ett barn behövs för denna forskning. Vårdnadshavare kommer att dock få ett brev såsom detta och möjlighet att ge samtycke. Datainsamlingen kommer att pågå i ungefär ett år. Utifrån detta insamlade intervju- och observationsmaterial, planerar jag att skriva tre vetenskapliga artiklar för publicering i internationella tidskrifter.

### Vad innebär det för förskollärarna att delta i denna studie?

Projektet är etikprövat och har godkänts av Etikprövningsnämnden (diarienummer 2020-00667). Studiesyftet skapades utifrån en bedömning av den potentiella nyttan för deltagarna och samhället i förhållande till eventuella riskerna för deltagarna. Riskerna tas på allvar och har minimerats. Deltagande är frivilligt och samtycke ges skriftligen. Om deltagare ångrar sig kan de när som helst välja att avsluta sitt deltagande, såväl under pågående observation eller intervju, som efter att materialinsamlingen avslutats. De behöver inte uppge varför de inte längre vill delta och det kommer

inte innebära några konsekvenser för dem som väljer att avbryta deltagandet. Deltagarna får kontaktuppgifter till en administratör vid Institutionen för sociologi och arbetsvetenskap som inte är involverad i forskningen ifall de vill undvika att informera medverkande forskare kring avslutat deltagande direkt, eller om de känner behov av råd och stöd relaterat till deras medverkan i studien.

Ingen obehörig kommer kunna ta del av det insamlade materialet som förvaras i låst utrymme. Anteckningar skrivna på datorn kommer att läggas i en lösenordskyddad mapp som bara huvudansvarig forskare Megan Rådesjö har åtkomst till. Transkriberingar från intervjuer samt anteckningarna från observationerna kommer anonymiseras, göras konfidentiella och enbart användas för att skriva forskningsskrifter (en avhandling i form av vetenskapliga artiklar och en kappa), samt även till presentationer av forskningsresultat på konferenser och seminarier.

Göteborgs universitet är ansvarigt för materialet som kommer att behandlas i enlighet med EU:s dataskyddsförordning (GDPR) artikel 6.1a,e. När projektet har avslutats arkiveras datamaterialet vid Institutionen för sociologi och arbetsvetenskap. Tio år efter avslutat projekt kommer ett beslut tas om huruvida forskningsmaterialet bedöms ha något värde för framtiden eller om det får gallras ut, i enlighet med Göteborgs universitets regler för hantering och arkivering av forskningsmaterial. EU:s dataskyddsförordning (GDPR) syftar till att skydda människor mot att deras personliga integritet kränks genom behandling av personuppgifter. Den som vill kan kostnadsfritt ta del av sina uppgifter som hanteras i studien, och vid behov få eventuella fel rättade.

Det går även att begära att uppgifter om en själv raderas samt att behandlingen av ens personuppgifter begränsas. För att göra detta vänder man sig i första hand till Megan Rådesjö. Vid Göteborgs Universitet finns det även ett personuppgifts- och dataskyddsombud vars uppgift är att kontrollera att forskningsmaterialet behandlas korrekt i vetenskapliga studier. Denna person heter Kristina Ullgren. Hennes kontaktuppgifter går att finna under "Kontaktinformation" nedan. Om någon är missnöjd med hur ens personuppgifter behandlas har denna rätt att ge in klagomål till Datainspektionen, som är tillsynsmyndighet.

Studiens design syftar till att ge deltagarna möjligheten att berätta om sig själva i relation till jämställdhet/jämställdhetsarbete med egna ord och utifrån den egna expertisen. Deltagarna tas om hand med hänsyn tagen till deras känslor och behov, vilket betyder att de inte behöver svara på oönskade frågor eller delta i studien om de inte vill. Vidare ska personliga och känsliga uppgifter (ort/ålder/etnicitet/kön/genus/sexualitet/religion/politisk ideologi osv) hanteras med försiktighet genom anonymisering så att ingen information kommer kunna användas för att identifiera deltagaren. Deltagarna kan också när som helst få ta del av mitt dokumentationsmaterial. De får även alltid möjligheten att läsa eller höra analyserna och kommentera dem innan de offentliggörs

### **Vad kan förskolan och förskollärarna få ut av att delta i studien?**

Projektet ger ny kunskap om förskollärarnas roll i implementering och genomförande av läroplanens jämställdhetsmål. Sådan kunskap är av nytta till förskollärna, förskolor, förskollärarutbildningen, riksdag och regeringen samt samhället i stort. Men det finns även flera fördelar att få ut av att delta i studien:

#### Förskollärare och Förskolor:

- Deltagande förskollärare får ta del av inspelningar och transkriberingar av deras egna intervjuer, samt en sammanfattning av mina observationer av dem. Detta kan inspirera till reflektion av sin yrkesroll i relation till jämställdhetsarbetet. Sådan reflektion kan bidra till ökad professionskunskap.
- Allmänna studieresultat är förskolans att ta del av, vilket kan medvetandegöra hinder och möjligheter i implementering av läroplan i allmänhet och i frågan om jämställdhet i synnerhet.
- Stöd via handledning för rektorn, förskollärarna och arbetslaget. Detta exempelvis i form av litteratur/resurstips och hjälp i planeringen av hur implementering av jämställdhetsarbetet kan göras.
- Föreläsningar eller workshops för personal, vilket kan ge nya och/eller fördjupade teoretiska glasögon att förstå jämställdhetsarbetet utifrån.

#### Förskollärarytbildning:

- Fyra olika vetenskapliga artiklar ska publiceras för denna avhandling. Tre av artiklarna är baserade på intervjuer och observationer av förskollärarna. Alla kommer att kunna användas som kurslitteratur.
- Resultaten från denna studie kan belysa områden som är bra och kan stärkas i förskollärarytbildningen.
- Denna studie kan göra utgångspunkt för att diskutera hur förskollärarna kan använda och tänka på läroplanen speciellt när det gäller jämställdhet.

#### Samhälle (inkl. vårdnadshavare, riksdag, regering):

- Föreläsningar eller workshops för vårdnadshavare, vilket kan ge verktyg att jobba ihop med förskolan och hemma med jämställdhetsarbetet och genusfrågor.
- Litteratur/tips om genusfrågor, jämställdhet i hemmet och i samarbetet med förskolan kan samlas i ett mejl eller informativbrev för vårdnadshavare.
- Resultaten i denna studie ska i sin grund vara sociologiska och relateras till jämställdhet i stort. Därför kan de ge mer kunskap om förskollärarnas roll i samhället relaterad till genus och jämställdhet.
- Myndigheter inklusive av Skolverket och Skolinspektion läser, granskar och använder doktorand-avhandlingar i deras rapporter och bedömningar.
- Resultaten kan även inspirera till nya diskussioner och forskning.

Tillsammans kan vi diskutera vilka av dessa är intressanta för förskolan, deltagarna, och vårdnadshavare. Ta gärna kontakt med mig om du har frågor eller funderingar.

## Appendix Two

### Informationsbrev till vårdnadshavare

Hej! Jag heter Megan Rådesjö. Jag är doktorand vid Institutionen för sociologi och arbetsvetenskap (SOCAV) och forskarskolan Centrum för utbildningsvetenskap och lärarforskning (CUL) vid Göteborgs universitet. Detta är ett informationsbrev om mitt avhandlingsprojekt med preliminära arbetstiteln: *The Feminist Meanings and Matterings of Preschool Teachers' Gender Equality Work in Sweden*.

### Bakgrund, Syfte, och Metod

Jämställdhet i förskolan diskuteras ofta i förhållande till läroplanen. Enligt läroplanen har förskollärarna störst ansvar och kompetens i det pedagogiska arbetet. Läroplanen behöver dock tolkas och en central utgångspunkt för denna studie är att jämställdhet kan förstås på många olika sätt. Detta betyder även att jämställdhetsarbetet kan göras på många olika sätt. Dessa olika sätt att förstå och genomföra jämställdhetsarbete kan bero på många saker, t.ex. på hur vi själva har upplevt jämställdhet och/eller ojämställdhet. Därför tillfrågas förskollärare att delta i denna studie som avser att öka kunskapen om förskollärares unika och olika roller i implementering och genomförande av jämställdhetsarbete i förskolan. Specifikt är syftet att undersöka hur förskollärare tolkar och använder läroplanen, men också att förstå hur de själva relaterar till detta jämställdhetsarbete. Denna studie är kvalitativ och utformad som en etnografisk studie vilket innebär att intervjuer och observationer ingår som en del i materialinsamlingen. Utifrån detta insamlade intervju- och observationsmaterial, planerar jag att skriva tre vetenskapliga artiklar för publicering i internationella tidskrifter.

### Vad innebär det för förskollärarna att delta i denna studie?

Projektet har genomgått etisk prövning av Etikprövningsmyndigheten (Du kan kolla upp detta själv med: Dnr 2020-00667). Studiesyftet skapades utifrån en bedömning av den potentiella nyttan för medverkande förskolor och samhället i förhållande till eventuella riskerna för deltagarna. Riskerna tas på allvar och har minimerats. Deltagande är frivilligt och samtycke ges skriftligen. Om deltagare ångrar sig kan de när som helst välja att avsluta sitt deltagande, såväl under pågående observation eller intervju, som efter att materialinsamlingen avslutats. De behöver inte uppge varför de inte längre vill delta och det kommer inte innebära några konsekvenser för dem som väljer att avbryta deltagandet. Deltagarna får kontaktuppgifter till en administratör vid Institutionen för sociologi och arbetsvetenskap som inte är involverad i forskningen ifall de vill undvika att informera medverkande forskare kring avslutat deltagande direkt, eller om de känner behov av råd och stöd relaterat till deras medverkan i studien.

Ingen obehörig kommer kunna ta del av det insamlade materialet som förvaras i låst utrymme. Anteckningar skrivna på datorn kommer att läggas i en lösenordsskyddad mapp som bara, jag, huvudansvarig forskare Megan Rådesjö har åtkomst till. Transkriberingar från intervjuer samt anteckningarna från observationerna kommer anonymiseras, göras konfidentiella och enbart användas för

att skriva forskningsskrifter (en avhandling i form av vetenskapliga artiklar och en kappa), samt även till presentationer av forskningsresultat på konferenser och seminarier.

Göteborgs universitet är ansvarigt för materialet som kommer att behandlas i enlighet med EU:s dataskyddsförordning (GDPR) artikel 6.1a,e. När projektet har avslutats arkiveras datamaterialet vid Institutionen för sociologi och arbetsvetenskap. Tio år efter avslutat projekt kommer ett beslut tas om huruvida forskningsmaterialet bedöms ha något värde för framtiden eller om det får gallras ut, i enlighet med Göteborgs universitets regler för hantering och arkivering av forskningsmaterial. EU:s dataskyddsförordning (GDPR) syftar till att skydda människor mot att deras personliga integritet kränks genom behandling av personuppgifter. Den som vill kan kostnadsfritt ta del av sina uppgifter som hanteras i studien, och vid behov få eventuella fel rättade.

Det går även att begära att uppgifter om en själv raderas samt att behandlingen av ens personuppgifter begränsas. För att göra detta vänder man sig i första hand till mig, Megan Rådesjö. Vid Göteborgs Universitet finns det även ett personuppgifts- och dataskyddsombud vars uppgift är att kontrollera att forskningsmaterialet behandlas korrekt i vetenskapliga studier. Denna person heter Kristina Ullgren och hennes kontaktuppgifter går att finna under "Kontaktinformation" nedan. Om någon är missnöjd med hur ens personuppgifter behandlas har denna rätt att ge in klagomål till Datainspektionen, som är tillsynsmyndighet.

Studiens design syftar till att ge deltagarna möjligheten att berätta om sig själva i relation till jämställdhet/jämställdhetsarbete med egna ord och utifrån den egna expertisen. Deltagarna tas om hand med hänsyn tagen till deras känslor och behov, vilket betyder att de inte behöver svara på obekväma frågor eller delta i studien om de inte vill. Vidare ska personliga och känsliga uppgifter (ort/ålder/etnicitet/kön/genus/sexualitet/religion/politisk ideologi osv) hanteras med försiktighet genom anonymisering så att ingen information kommer kunna användas för att identifiera deltagaren. Deltagarna kan också när som helst få ta del av mitt dokumentationsmaterial. De får även alltid möjligheten att läsa eller höra analyserna och kommentera dem innan de offentliggörs.

### **Vad innebär denna studie och materialinsamlingen för dina barn?**

Jag kommer att observera i förskoleverksamheten. Detta betyder att jag ibland kommer att finnas med i klassrummet, uppehållsrum, eller vara involverad i aktiviteter som förskollärarna bjuder in mig till. Förskollärarna arbetar på som vanligt i förskolan med den enda skillnaden att jag ibland är med. Barnen i verksamheten är inte fokus för materialinsamlingen. Även om det inte är barnen som står i centrum för observationerna, önskar vi ditt samtycke för att i analyser av materialen eventuellt kunna inkludera interaktion mellan deltagande förskollärare, förskoleverksamhet och ditt barn. För att samtycka signera samtyckesavtalet. Om du inte samtycker, kommer eventuella interaktioner mellan förskollärare och ditt barn inte att observeras eller användas som dataunderlag i forskningen.

### **Vem nyttas av denna studie?**

Projektet kommer att ge kunskap om förskollärarnas roll i implementering och genomförande av läroplanens jämställdhetsmål. Sådan kunskap är av nytta till förskollärna, förskolor, förskollärarutbildningen, riksdag och regeringen samt samhället i stort. Men det finns även mer fördelar att få ut av att delta i studien:

#### Förskollärare och Förskolor:

- Deltagande förskollärare får ta del av inspelningar och transkriberingar av deras egna intervjuer, samt en sammanfattning av mina observationer av dem. Detta kan inspirera till reflektion av sin yrkesroll i relation till jämställdhetsarbetet. Sådan reflektion kan bidra till ökad professionskunskap.
- Allmänna studieresultat är förskolans att ta del av, vilket kan medvetandegöra hinder och möjligheter i implementering av läroplan i allmänhet och i frågan om jämställdhet i synnerhet.
- Stöd via handledning för rektorn, förskollärarna och arbetslaget. Detta exempelvis i form av litteratur/resurstips och hjälp i planeringen av hur implementering av jämställdhetsarbetet kan göras.
- Föreläsningar eller workshops för personal, vilket kan ge nya och/eller fördjupade teoretiska glasögon att förstå jämställdhetsarbetet utifrån

#### Förskollärarutbildning:

- Fem olika vetenskapliga artiklar kommer att publiceras för denna avhandling. Tre av artiklarna är baserade på intervjuer och observationer av förskollärarna. Alla kommer att kunna användas som kurslitteratur.
- Resultaten från denna studie kan belysa områden som är bra och kan stärkas i förskollärarutbildningen.
- Denna studie kan göra utgångspunkt för att diskutera hur förskollärarna kan använda och tänka på läroplanen speciellt när det gäller jämställdhet.

#### Samhälle (inkl. vårdnadshavare, riksdag, regering):

- Föreläsningar eller workshops för vårdnadshavare, vilket kan ge verktyg att jobba ihop med förskolan och hemma med jämställdhetsarbetet och genusfrågor.
- Litteratur/tips om genusfrågor, jämställdhet i hemmet och i samarbetet med förskolan kan samlas i ett mejl eller informativbrev för vårdnadshavare.
- Resultaten i denna studie ska i sin grund vara sociologiska och relateras till jämställdhet i stort. Därför kan de ge mer kunskap om förskollärarnas roll i samhället relaterad till genus och jämställdhet.
- Myndigheter inklusive av Skolverket och Skolinspektion läser, granskar och använder doktorand-avhandlingar i deras rapporter och bedömningar.
- Resultaten kan även inspirera till nya diskussioner och forskning.

Tillsammans kan vi diskutera vilka av dessa är intressanta för förskolan, deltagarna, och vårdnadshavare. Ta gärna kontakt med mig om du har frågor eller funderingar.

## Appendix Three

### Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Phase One of Field Work

This is the semi-structured interview guide for phase one of field work. The questions relate to the preschool teacher's personal, educational and work background. At the beginning of the interview, I told participants (again) about the purpose of the study, research ethics and that I have five main questions, and that they should only answer the questions that they feel comfortable answering. I asked the questions in the order they are listed, however, I prompted according to the aspects mentioned in parentheses. I concluded the interview with a question about the curriculum and told them we would continue talking about the curriculum in our next interview. I ended by asking if there was anything else they wanted to address that was not taken up during the interview.

1. Hur skulle du beskriva dig själv för någon annan? (Ålder, kön, sexualitet, ras/etnicitet, religion/filosofisk övertygelse/politiska åsikter).
2. Berätta lite om ditt val av arbete: Hur kommer det sig att du valde att jobba i förskolan som förskollärare? Hur länge har du arbetat som förskollärare? När/var utbildade du dig till förskollärare?
3. Berätta lite om själva arbetet: Vad är dina huvudsakliga uppgifter som förskollärare? Ge några exempel på daglig verksamhet. Hur uppfattar du att det arbete du gör skiljer sig från det arbete andra som jobbar på förskolan gör (t.ex. barnskötare)? Vad tror du att andra vet om förskollärare: Hur tror du att förskollärare uppfattas i samhället? Varför?
4. Hur skulle du definiera (o)jämslälldhet? Vad betyder jämslälldhet för dig i ditt arbete? Från ditt perspektiv: Vem är det som gynnas av jämslälldhetsarbete i förskolan?
5. Är det något ytterligare som du vill ta upp? Något som du tycker att jag glömt att fråga om?

## Appendix Four

### **Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Phase Three of Field Work**

This is the semi-structured interview guide for phase three of field work. The questions relate to the preschool teacher's understandings and interpretations of the gender equality mandate with a focus on the curriculum and any that I had from earlier phases of research. I began by reminding them of the research ethics principles (informed consent, anonymity/confidentiality, and benefit). I reminded participants that we talked about the curriculum in the first interview. I told them that I have six main questions, and questions related to observations and RSIs. I reminded them that they should only answer the questions that they feel comfortable answering. Again, I ended by asking if there was anything else they wanted to address that was not taken up during the interview.

Also notable: During this interview, we had the curriculum present and read from it if they wanted to consider statements directly from this document.

1. Hur skulle du beskriva vad läroplanen är och vilken funktion den fyller? Hur använder du den i ditt arbete?
2. Har du noterat de jämställdhetsorienterade målen i läroplanen? Vad tänker/tycker du om dem?
3. I läroplanen används det olika begrepp som jag tänker vi skulle uppehålla oss vid: Hur skulle du definiera kön? Genus? Hur skulle du relatera dessa begrepp till ditt arbete?
4. Utifrån läroplanen: Vad betyder ordet jämställdhet för dig i ditt arbete?
5. Utifrån läroplanen: Vad betyder jämställdhetsperspektiv för dig i ditt arbete?
6. Har du några exempel på hur du arbetar medvetet och aktivt med jämställdhet?
7. Övriga frågor relaterade till mina observationer av deltagaren/RSIs.
8. Avslutningsvis – är det något som du tycker att vi har missat att prata om?

## Appendix Five

### Semi-Structured RSI Interview Guide for Phase Two of Field Work

Please see the details of how this was done in practice in the main text, or in the article: Rådesjö, 2025a.

- A. Del A utgår från vinjetter som är utformade att uttrycka hypotetiska situationer i klassrummet för att ni ska kunna ge exempel och resonera om hur ni skulle kunna reagera eller hantera dylika situationer. **Välj fyra situationer (varje medverkande väljer två) och diskutera tillsammans hur ni troligtvis skulle kunna resonera, reagera, eller hantera dem. Hur skulle du kanske göra eller vad skulle du kanske säga om dessa situationer hände på förskolan?**
1. Charlie har målat sina naglar hemma och visar de för dig med glädje.
  2. “Fröken!” Säger ett barn till dig.
  3. Isabelle och Vega väljer oftast att leka med dockor. Ni sitter vid matbordet men är snart klara. Du vet att de kommer att springa in i ett annat rum för att leka med dockorna sen.
  4. Abdul säger att han vill bli en flicka.
  5. “Hej Astrid, gumman!” säger din kollega Karin.
  6. Elliot och Petter säger att Theodor är en flicka för att Theodor leker oftast med flickor.
  7. Jonas tar på sig en klänning och visar den för dig med glädje. Han säger sedan till sina kompisar att han är en prinsessa och börjar skratta. Han dansar runt och pausar igen för att skratta med sina kompisar.
  8. Förskolan ska ha en julfika där barnen får klä ut sig. Du vet att barn brukar klä ut sig som antingen tomten, tomtemor, Lucia, eller en pepparkaka. Pojkarna brukar klä ut sig som tomten eller en pepparkaka och flickorna brukar klä ut sig tomtemor eller Lucia.
  9. Ida brukar äta större portioner än andra barn och säger hon vill äta för att hon är hungrig. Hennes föräldrar har nämnt att de är oroliga för att BVC betraktar henne som överviktig.
  10. Albin tycker om rosa men hans kompis Asad säger att rosa är för flickor.
  11. Din kollega har delat barnen i två grupper: pojkar och flickor.
  12. Caroline, Hafsa och Max leker att de jobbar på ett sjukhus. Caroline säger “Hafsa och jag är sjuksköterskorna för att vi är flickor. Max, du är doktorn!”
  13. Två föräldrar lämnar sina barn på förskolan. Barnen, Christopher och Doris, kramar varandra när de ses. En av föräldrarna säger, “Jaha Christopher, är Doris din flickvän? Gud, vad söt!”
  14. Billy, William och Kim brukar leka krig ute på lekplatsen.
  15. “Ge din fröken en kram.” säger en förälder till sitt barn.

16. Din kollega säger till Karl: ”Du måste äta upp din mat så att du blir stor och stark.”

**B.** Utifrån ovan exempel – vilken/vilka tycker du är tydligt relaterade till förskolans arbete med jämställdhet? Varför?

Finns det exempel i ovan situationer som du inte alls tycker hör hemma inom området “jämställdhet i förskolan”? Varför?

**C.** Är det någon del i förskolans fysiska miljö som är mer förknippad med jämställdhet/jämställdhetsarbete för dig (till exempel kan några vanliga delar av en förskoleavdelning inkludera: utemiljö, vid bordet, tamburen, hemvrån, badrummet, köket, läshörnet, bygghörnet, ateljé/målarrum, bilhorn, musikhörn osv)? Ge exempel och förklara gärna varför/varför inte.

1. Finns det leksaker och/eller andra fysiska material som är mer eller mindre förknippade med jämställdhet? Ge exempel och förklara gärna varför/varför inte.

**D.** Hur tänker du att jämställdhetsperspektiv kan inkluderas i planering och dokumentation? Ge gärna konkreta exempel.

## Appendix Six

### Informerat Samtyckesavtal Till Förskollärare

#### Förskollärares roll i genomförandet av läroplanens jämställdhetsmål i Sverige: En etnografisk studie (officiell titel väntar)

Doktorand/Forskare: Megan Rådesjö

Jag har läst bifogat informationsbrev och diskuterat forskningsprojektet med Megan Rådesjö. Jag är medveten att hon genomför denna forskning som doktorand vid Göteborgs Universitet med överinseende av hennes handledare Docent Ylva Ulfsson och Senior Lektor Jenny Bengtsson.

Jag samtycker till observationer i min verksamhet och ljudinspelade intervjuer. Jag samtycker och är medveten att Megans forskning:

- **Inte** ska inkludera mitt namn  
**Inte** ska inkludera förskolans namn  
**Inte** ska inkludera kommunens namn
- Ska inkludera en pseudonym istället för mitt namn  
Ska inkludera information från observationer och intervjuer
- Kan skicka ett utkast på engelska med hennes slutsatser av mitt deltagande till mig via mejl
- Kan skicka inspelningen från intervjuerna och/eller ett transkript till mig

Jag förstår att deltagandet är frivilligt och att jag kan dra mig ur studien. Jag är medveten att jag kan ställa mina frågor angående forskningen och avhandlingen till Megan Rådesjö via telefon eller mejl. Jag är medveten att jag kan också ställa mina frågor angående forskningen och avhandlingen till hennes handledare Ylva Ulfsson.

Jag förstår att slutsatser av mitt deltagande kommer att publiceras och jag samtycker till detta.

Signatur: \_\_\_\_\_ .

Datum: \_\_\_\_\_ .

Namn: \_\_\_\_\_ .

**Informerat Samtyckesavtal Till Vårdnadshavare**  
**Samtycke till ditt barns medverkande i studien: Förskollärares roll i genomförandet av läroplanens jämställdhetsmål i Sverige: En etnografisk studie**  
**(officiell titel väntar)**

Doktorand/Forskare: Megan Rådesjö

Jag har läst bifogat informationsbrev och vet att jag kan diskutera forskningsprojektet med Megan Rådesjö. Jag är medveten att hon genomför denna forskning som doktorand vid Göteborgs Universitet med överinseende av hennes handledare Professor Ylva Ulfsdotter Eriksson.

Jag samtycker till inkludering av mitt barn i observationer av interaktioner med sin förskollärare och förskoleverksamheten. Jag samtycker och är medveten att Megan Rådesjös forskning:

- **Inte** ska inkludera mitt barns namn
- **Inte** ska inkludera förskolans namn
- **Inte** ska inkludera kommunens namn
- Ska bara observera mitt barn i samband med interaktioner med sin förskollärare och förskoleverksamheten.

Jag förstår att deltagandet är frivilligt och att jag kan dra mitt barn ur studien när som helst. Jag är medveten att jag kan ställa mina frågor angående forskningen och avhandlingen till Megan Rådesjö via telefon/SMS eller mejl. Jag är medveten att jag också kan ställa mina frågor angående forskningen och avhandlingen till hennes handledare Ylva Ulfsdotter Eriksson.

Jag förstår att slutsatser av mitt barns deltagande kommer att publiceras och jag samtycker till detta.

Signatur: \_\_\_\_\_ .

Datum: \_\_\_\_\_ .

Namn: \_\_\_\_\_ .

# DOKTORSAVHANDLINGAR VID INSTITUTIONEN FÖR SOCIOLOGI OCH ARBETSVETENSKAP FR O M 2012

1. Malmqvist, Karl (2012) *Offentlighetens gränser: Fem kultursociologiska studier av kontroverser kring litterära självframställningar i Sverige, 1976–2008*
2. Larsson, Jörgen (2012) *Studier i tidsmässig välfärd – med fokus på tidsstrategier och tidspolitik för småbarnsfamiljer*
3. Backman, Christel (2012) *Criminal Records in Sweden. Regulation of Access to Criminal Records and the Use of Criminal Background checks by Employers*
4. Gunnarsson, Andreas (2012) *Unleashing Science Popularisation: Studies on Science as Popular Culture*
5. Kantelius, Hannes (2012) *Inbyrningens logik – konsekvenser för individ och organisation*
6. Westberg, Niklas (2012) *Meddelanden från enskildheten – En sociologisk studie av ensamhet och avskildhet*
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9. Puaca, Goran (2013) *Educational choices of the future. A sociological inquiry into micro-politics in education*
10. Björk, Lisa (2013) *Contextualizing managerial work in local government organizations*
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12. Lovén Seldén, Kristina (2014) *Europafacklig samverkan. Problem och möjligheter*
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