THE MOST POWERFUL FEMALE POLITICIANS ARE STILL SUBORDINATED

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON GENDER INEQUALITY IN TOP POSITIONS IN SWEDISH NATIONAL POLITICS

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Abstract:

Sweden is one of the most gender-equal countries in the world and the representation in the parliament is quantitively equal. However, Sweden has never had a female prime minister and qualitative inequalities in politics persist. This caught our interest. To examine how gender inequalities in top positions in Swedish national politics can be explained, qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with members of the Swedish parliament. The empirical data was then analyzed through a theoretical framework extracted from gender theories and concepts found in previous research. The concepts are gender systems, inequality regimes and homo- and heterosociality. Our research shows that due to a division caused by different interacting inequality-producing processes, female and male politicians face different expectations and are perceived as suitable for different political areas. Based on our empirical findings, a model was developed displaying the inequality-producing processes' relative importance and interaction, causing women to be less likely to advance to top positions. With this model, we contribute to previous research by categorizing processes and highlighting the new emerging process hatred in social media. Thus, we provide a comprehensive model describing gender inequality in the context of Swedish national politics. We hope that the comprehensive model's categorization of inequality-producing processes will provide guidance in future attempts to improve gender equality.

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Table of Content

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Sweden and the Nordic countries are often considered to be at the forefront of gender equality (Erlandsson, 2019). The Swedish parliament is among the world's most equal parliaments (Swedish Parliament) and the Swedish government is the world's first feminist government (Swedish Government). As a feminist government, gender equality is a crucial priority in decisions and allocation of resources. Further, women and men having the same power to shape society and their lives are considered a human right and a matter of democracy and justice (ibid). Likewise, the Swedish parliament has since 2006 actively worked towards an equal parliament where every member, despite gender, works according to the same conditions (Swedish Parliament).

The Swedish government and parliament's strong focus on equality has resulted in improvements but shortcomings remain. Quantitively, considering the share of female and male representatives, the level of equality in Swedish national politics is high. However, qualitatively the level of equality is lower, resulting in women facing greater resistance in their political performance (Säll, 2019). Qualitative shortcomings include how men and women are treated and spoken to, as well as different attitudes and approaches towards the genders (Swedish Parliament).

In the Nordics, Sweden is the only country that has never had a female prime minister. Even in comparison to EU states, Sweden distinguishes itself in that aspect (Svensson, 2019). Generally, in Swedish politics, there are more women in directly selected positions, e.g., members of parliament, compared to appointed leading positions, e.g., chairmen or prime minister (Säll, 2019). On a global level, the UN states equality in politics as a target of the fifth SDG concerning gender equality. Thereby, it is a global issue on urgent call for action (United Nations). Gender equality is a fundamental part of a democratic society and gender inequalities may result in serious consequences both on an individual and societal level (Säll, 2019).

Against this background, gender equality is highlighted as an important issue and it is clear that shortcomings prevail in Sweden, especially at top positions. Thereupon, this thesis will study gender inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics.

1.2 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is to gain further understanding of women's barriers to reaching top positions in Swedish national politics. We aim to do so through the lens of a theoretical framework extracted from gender theories and by conducting an interpretative study focusing on Swedish parliament members' perceptions. The research question is formulated as follows:

How do members of the Swedish Parliament perceive gender inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics?

1.3 Research Gap and Expected Contribution

The increase in women's access to political power has led to an increase in research focusing on women's political activity and empowerment. Despite this, there is still a lack of research on the meaning of gender in the context of women in politics (Alexander, A. C. et al., 2016). The lack of research particularly concerns studies focusing on women's representation in leadership positions in politics (Bolzendahl, 2014; Cheng & Tavits, 2011; Krook & O'Brien, 2012). Thus, a research gap has been identified for our research question focusing on gender inequality in top

positions in Swedish national politics. Further, studying gender in the context of Swedish politics is of particular interest as Sweden is among the most gender-equal countries in the world (Statista) and has never had a female prime minister. Additionally, despite efforts made to improve women's political representation in Sweden, barriers still exist for female politicians (Folke & Rickne, 2016). This makes it interesting to further investigate potential factors contributing to the prevalence of these barriers.

By researching gender inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics, we hope to contribute to the understanding of why women are still underrepresented at some of the most prestigious and influential positions in Sweden. Furthermore, we hope our provided answer of different inequality-producing processes and the interaction of these processes will help guide future attempts to improve gender equality.

1.4 Delimitations

The study delimits itself to focus on Swedish national politics, thereby ignoring Swedish regional and local politics. Gender inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics is researched by qualitative interviews with members of the Swedish Parliament. Thus, the focus is on the respondents' experiences and perceptions, and other factors that may contribute to gender inequality, e.g., election outcomes and perceptions of voters, are excluded. Also, by focusing on gender as the basis of the inequality in top positions other bases, e.g., ethnicity and age, are excluded.

Due to GDPR, we could not study party affiliation. Hence, we delimit ourselves to study parliament members' perceptions as individuals rather than as party representatives. Therefore, party-specific factors that may contribute to explain gender inequality in Swedish national politics are ignored.

2. Theory

Based on the introduction, gender inequality is emphasized as an issue in top positions in Swedish national politics. The following section reviews previous research on gender and its effects in top positions and politics. Based on key concepts identified in previous research, a theoretical framework is then presented. Thereafter follows a discussion on theory usage and our research question's theoretical relevance, laying the foundation for our continued research.

2.1 Previous research

On a general level, our research aims to contribute to the field of gender studies. On a more specific level, to the field of gender inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics. In order to contribute to this field and answer our research question, an overview of gender definitions and existing knowledge on women in top positions in general and in politics is provided.

2.1.1 Gender

In gender studies, it should be acknowledged that gender can be defined differently. The choice of definition has implications on explanations for why men and women are unequal, if and how equality can be achieved, and the ontological position.

One definition takes a biological approach, arguing that men and women have distinctive psychological and behavioral propensities because of biological differences (West & Zimmerman, 1987). These biological differences determine the structural arrangement of society and social consequences for the genders (ibid). With this definition, male dominance is inevitable. Therefore, women will always be dependent on men and subordinated (Wahl et al., 2011). The view of gender as fixed biological differences, rather than social constructions, aligns the biological definition with an objectivistic ontology (Bell et al., 2019).

Another definition recognizes gender as social and cultural constructions. Humans create and construct what they perceive as feminine and masculine, and these constructions result in women's subordination. Central to these constructions are the use of language, conceptions and norms. Women's subordination is thus not given by nature, it can change through our actions and language (Alvesson & Billing, 2011). By defining gender as social constructions, this definition aligns with a constructivist ontology (Bell et al., 2019). This definition does not neglect the genders' biological differences, but instead often connects these to the word sex. Thereby, making a distinction between gender and sex. However, this distinction is complex because notions of biology are social phenomena, thus gender and sex tend to overlap (Alvesson & Billing, 2011).

2.1.2 Women in Top Positions

To understand inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics, research on inequality in top positions in general is first provided. Although not focusing on the political context, this research can still highlight general organizational inequality-producing processes.

Research highlights a gender gap in top positions, demonstrating that women are less likely to hold leadership positions (Bygren et al., 2017; Erlandsson, 2019; Smith, 2002). Additionally, when women have leadership positions, these positions are located at lower levels of management compared to men (Smith, 2002).

There is extensive research regarding explanations for gender disparities in leadership conditions and outcomes (Erlandsson, 2019). These explanations mainly regard choices the genders make and discriminations by employers (Bygren & Gähler, 2012). Discrimination can

be caused by family formation. Swedish data show that if men and women do not have children, the gender gap in supervisory authority is marginal. However, with children, the gender gap expands as men's chances of gaining supervisory authority strongly increase, while women's chances remain at the same level (ibid). Other research points to the same disadvantage in work outcomes and suggests that mothers are also discriminated in hiring and salary (Correll et al., 2007). However, these gender disparities can also be due to mothers' own choices and not discrimination (Fearfull & Haynes 2006 cited in Alvesson et al., 2011).

The glass ceiling is another common explanation for gender disparities in top positions (Albrecht et al., 2003; Cotter et al., 2001). It refers to gender barriers producing patterns of female under-representation in organizations (Acker, 2009). Although research often connect the glass ceiling to top positions, other research argues that female discrimination is constant on all hierarchal levels. In top positions, the low female representation only gives the appearance of a more concentrated glass ceiling (Baxter & Wright, 2000).

Lastly, discrimination has been identified in recruitment. For example, male recruiters tend to recruit other men over women (Erlandsson, 2019). Additionally, recruitment to top positions through informal networks benefit men (Reskin & McBrier, 2000).

2.1.3 Women in Politics
Finally, we turn to the thesis's context, women in politics. Examining existing knowledge guides us into how our research question can be addressed in a relevant way.

Women's access to political leadership positions has increased considerably in the last decades (Alexander et al., 2016; Krook & O'Brien, 2012). Regardless, there is nowhere women have equal influence and political authority as men (Alexander et al., 2016). Even where women have the same formal rights, they are still underrepresented in decision-making (Jónasdóttir, 1985; 1991, cited in Wägnerud, 1999).

Similar to the previous section, recruitment is mentioned as a contribution to male dominance in top positions in politics. In political parties, recruitment is affected by informal rules and practices. As men have dominated politics historically, they have set these rules and practices to benefit men (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2015). An example is informal networks, often important in recruitment. As men set the rules, women are less likely to have access to resources required to build networks, thus affecting women's possibility to advance (ibid). Family is another identified contribution, both generally in top positions and now in politics. As housework and childcare responsibilities increase, the likelihood for women to consider running for office decreases. Men do not show this pattern (Palmer & Simon, 2008). Consequently, women are older than men in their first attempt to run. This has political consequences as key positions and chairs are based on longevity and seniority. However, family is not an exclusive explanation, even female college students are less likely than men to consider running (ibid).

Besides a skewed gender representation in top positions, the genders are also represented in different political areas (O'Brien, 2015; Säll, 2019; Wängnerud, 1996). In Sweden, women are represented in areas such as social and culture and underrepresented in areas such as defense (Hirdman, 1990). Researchers are divided regarding if this division contributes to women's exclusion from powerful top positions or not. Hirdman argues that as long as women are represented in different political areas than men, women are subordinated from power (Wängnerud, 1996). Contrariwise, Skjeie sees the gender division as an opportunity for women to legitimize the need for female representatives and promote women's interests. Thereby, Skjeie argues that the division does not keep women away from power (ibid).

6

Research also concerns attitudes towards female and male political leaders. Alexander and Andersen (1993) argue that women are perceived as more knowledgeable in social questions and men in defense and taxes. These perceptions stem from gender stereotypes (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Women are stereotyped as warm and sensitive, aligned with knowledge in social questions. Contrariwise, men are stereotyped as assertive and aggressive, aligned with knowledge in defense and economy. Further, masculine traits are more central to politics (ibid). Due to this, successful female candidates have to behave both feminine, showing motherly skills, and masculine, acting according to the political stereotype (Alexander & Andersen, 1993).

In Sweden, both male and female political representatives perceive gender equality in several areas, but traces of politics being male dominated still exist (Erikson, 2017). Traces of male-dominance collide with the stereotypical perception of women. Consequently, women face higher pressure to show competence and be well prepared to be taken seriously, especially in male political areas. Furthermore, women are more often exposed to master suppression techniques and objectification, e.g., comments on appearance (ibid).

Another inequality regards men and women having different access to political party leadership (O'Brien, 2015). In Sweden, women are more likely to become party leaders in struggling minor opposition parties and to resign if faced with unfavorable trajectories. This further suggests that higher demands are put on female political leaders (ibid). Other research confirms this, indicating that barriers for women's advancement to top positions in Swedish politics exist, despite Sweden's long history of efforts to reduce them (Folke & Rickne, 2016).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The following theoretical framework is designed to help answer how members of the Swedish parliament perceive gender inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics. It includes three main interlinked concepts identified in previous research. The concepts are *gender systems*, *inequality regimes* and *homo- and heterosociality*. The choice of theories places us in the segment of gender studies defining gender as social constructions. Consequently, we acknowledge gender inequality as changeable and hope to contribute to further understanding of social constructions creating and maintaining gender inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics.

2.2.1 Gender Systems

The first concept originates from previous research's general perceptions of male dominance and the genders being treated differently. These perceptions can be explained by gender systems.

Hirdman (1988) describes gender systems as dynamic systems consisting of different interacting processes, phenomena, conceptions and expectations that create and maintain patterns and regularities. Through patterns and regularities, gender systems structure the ordering of genders. In turn, the ordering of genders serves as the base for other social, economic and political orders.

Gender system can be discussed on a general level due to its two logics. The first logic is the separation of genders, suggesting that masculinity and femininity are opposites and should not be mixed. The second logic is the hierarchy, where men are the norm and women are subordinated. This implies that what men do is considered more valuable, resulting in men more often being chosen for powerful positions. The two logics are connected as the second hierarchical logic is legitimized through the first gender separating logic. The separation of genders is expressed in organizations in the way work is divided and in beliefs about

masculinity and femininity. These different separations are in themselves interlinked and strengthen each other. Additionally, as the genders are separated, men are allowed to be judged separately from women. Further, a general attribute of gender separation is that men are considered positive and women negative. Due to this general attribute, the hierarchical logic considering men as the norm is legitimized through the separation of genders (Hirdman, 1988).

The general attribute of men being seen as positive, and women negative is formed in gender contracts. These contracts exist in every society and include mutual conceptions guiding how men and women act and think. These mutual conceptions concern the ideal relation between the genders, how they should interact, talk and what they should look like. The gender contracts include different conceptions in different times, societies and classes, resulting in different gender separations and different hierarchical orders. However, although contracts and thereby gender systems are changeable, change is inhibited through the constant reproduction of gender systems, explaining why men are still the norm (Hirdman, 1988).

2.2.2 Inequality Regimes
The second concept is based on previous findings of barriers women face to reach top positions. These barriers can be understood by inequality regimes.

Inequality regimes exist in every organization as loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that create and maintain gender inequalities (Acker, 2009). Inequality regimes provide an analytical approach to understand the creation of inequalities in work organizations. Inequalities in work organizations are systematic disparities between groups in power and control over goals and outcomes, e.g., opportunities to advance, respect, and freedom of harassment. Inequalities vary in presence and severeness between organizations and are fluid and changeable as they are interlinked to conditions of society, politics, economy, history and culture (Acker, 2009).

Analysis of inequality regimes have several components. Firstly, the bases of inequality. Bases vary but gender, referring to socially constructed differences between men and women, is common. Another component is the shape and degree of inequalities, in turn, dependent on the steepness of the hierarchy, where gender disparities in authority tend to be greatest on higher levels. A third component is processes resulting in inequalities. Processes vary but are often guided and justified by images of the genders as differently suited for different jobs, where women are commonly viewed as less suited for top positions (Acker, 2009). One process is recruitment, often organized based on an ideal worker completely dedicated to work without family responsibilities. This image is implicitly a man (Acker, 1990). An image that affects recruitment and promotion processes to top positions, consequently affecting women's possibilities to reach these positions. Likewise, recruitment through social networks is another process maintaining gender inequalities (Acker, 2009).

Another component is impediments to changing inequality regimes. Impediments include invisibility of inequalities, especially to those advantaged by inequalities while those disadvantaged are more likely to notice them. Issues of inequalities not being prioritized or seen as organizational issues further contribute to invisibility (Acker, 2009). Another impediment is the legitimacy of inequalities. Legitimacy varies between organizations, political and economic conditions. The existence of anti-discrimination laws reduces legitimacy, while images of women more suited for childcare than demanding careers increase legitimacy (Acker, 2006).

2.2.3 Homo- and Heterosociality
The third concept comes from previous research's recognition of informal networks and recruitment as processes contributing to inequalities. Homo- and heterosociality can explain these processes.

Homosociality is clear elements in organizations' cultures characterized by men orienting towards other men, and men choosing men for important assignments (Wahl et al., 2011). This orientation occurs because men find it easier to identify with other men and turn to individuals they trust. Men have, in their quality of being men, more power and control more resources than women, resulting in men having more to offer and trade with. Consequently, men benefit from orienting towards men. Thus, networks of only men are created (Göransson, 2007). A consequence of homosociality is the segregation of men and women in organizations, especially at high authoritarian positions of power (Wahl et al., 2011).

Viewing homosociality as a gender ordering process means that it does not exclusively work in a context of only men. Contrariwise, women often play an important part as subordinated in homosocial processes. Heterosociality describes women's participation as heterosocial behavior where women relate to and confirm men through acts of loyalty. Loyalty can be expressed differently, by actively supporting men or actively not supporting women, e.g., by ignoring, working against or criticizing other women. Regardless of heterosocial expression women are subordinated from power, resulting in women having to orient towards the power (men) to do better and survive in organizations (Wahl et al., 2011).

2.3 Theory Usage
The theoretical framework brings the idea that gender systems, separating men and women hierarchically, exist in every society. As illustrated in figure 1, inequality regimes and homo- and heterosociality are seen as examples of interacting processes within gender systems, creating and maintaining this gender separation. In turn, gender systems are used to analyze the gender separation in Swedish national politics and processes creating and maintaining inequalities in top positions.
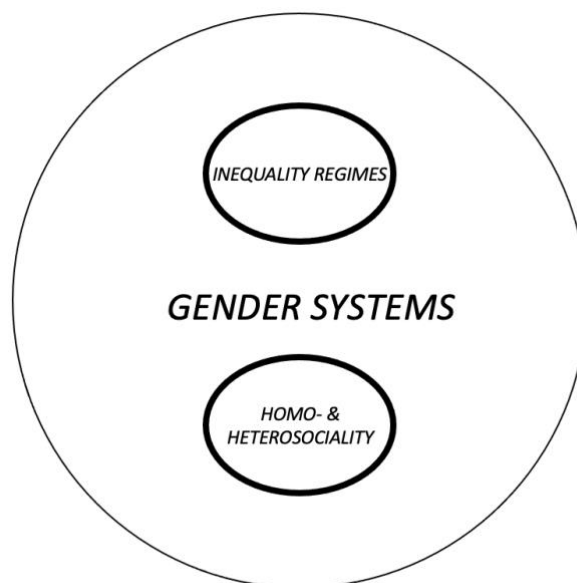
Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

Beyond being a process within gender systems, inequality regimes can be applied to locate practices producing inequalities, their location in organizational processes, and how these practices impede women's possibilities to reach top positions. Regarding homo- and heterosociality, the idea of informal networks´ gender ordering can explain how gender inequalities and male dominance are recreated in recruitment to top positions in Swedish national politics.

2.4 Theoretical Relevance

Based on the key concepts found in previous research, our theoretical framework was outlined. As described in theory usage, previous findings are considered as processes in gender systems, creating and maintaining gender inequality in top positions. However, a research gap is identified regarding how the interaction of different processes occurs in gender systems. Due to this, there is a lack of knowledge concerning if some processes are more or less important than others. Regarding inequalities in Swedish politics specifically, there is a lack of a comprehensive description of different processes contributing to current inequalities and these processes' interaction. Additionally, as the political environment is constantly changing, there might also be new emerging processes where current research is weak. Therefore, further research on inequalities in top positions in Swedish national politics is called for.

3. Method

The theory chapter brings the idea of gender systems with socially constructed processes dividing men and women hierarchically. Based on this, the thesis's method is designed to enable deeper knowledge of gender inequalities in Swedish national politics.

3.1 Research Approach

3.1.1 Ontology and Data Gathering Process

A social constructivist ontology underpinned by an interpretative approach is used. This is suitable since the theoretical framework identifies gender as social constructions, rather than something biological, and that gender inequalities are caused by socially interacting processes. A constructivist approach examines the construction of such social processes (Bell et al., 2019). Moreover, as the study aims to give an understanding of the respondents' perceptions of why and how gender inequalities occur, an interpretive approach is appropriate. The constructivist ontology implies that respondents' perceptions of reality are shaped in a constant process, thus this study presents several versions of the reality of gender inequalities and not a definitive one (ibid).

Data gathering is conducted through qualitative in-depth interviews. Aligned with the study's aim, it allows examination of parliament members' perceptions as inequalities are studied through the eyes of the respondents, located in the political context where the social behavior occurs (Bell et al., 2019). A qualitative approach is further motivated as researching gender discrimination quantitatively can be challenging as discrimination often occurs subconsciously (Bygren et al., 2017).

When conducting the interviews, a semi-structured approach is used, allowing the respondents to communicate openly about their perceptions on gender inequality and highlight aspects they perceive most important. Thus, themes that might not emerge with fully structured interviews can appear, and follow-up questions enable deeper understanding of the respondents' perceptions (Bell et al., 2019). Semi-structured interviews' weakness is that they may complicate the comparability of the respondents (ibid). To facilitate comparability, the interview guide was used to control that the most important comparable themes were covered in each interview.

3.1.2 Research Design and Mode of Reasoning

A cross-sectional research design is used, allowing us to use gender as an empirical variable to examine potential variations in perceptions of gender inequalities. However, with a cross-sectional design, data gathered at a single point in time, and a restricted sample, we can only examine potential tendencies of relationships and not causal relationships (Bell et al., 2019). To draw more conclusions, further studies are needed.

The study is based on abductive reasoning. The abductive back-and-forth engagement between collected data and previous research enables us to be open towards encountering empirical phenomena existing theory cannot account for. That is not possible with purely deductive or inductive reasoning (Bell et al., 2019). This is relevant for us because of the constantly changing political environment. Therefore, we do not simply want to use data to confirm theories' preunderstandings on why gender inequality in top positions exists (ibid).

3.2 Sample

16 members of the Swedish parliament were interviewed in March 2021. A convenience sampling was used, meaning that candidates who fit predetermined criteria were selected (Emerson, 2021). Party affiliation is not studied, but it is a factor that may influence

respondents' perceptions since structures and processes may differ between parties. Therefore, representatives from all parties were contacted. At last, respondents from seven out of eight parties participated. Representatives in the eighth party were not able to participate or did not respond.

Another selection criterion is experience of at least one term in office or similar political experience, e.g., being a minster. This to ensure that the respondents have sufficient experience of national politics and thus a perception of the subject. To evaluate potential variations between genders, we also wanted equal distribution of men and women. Lastly, to cover a broad spectrum of experiences, respondents of different ages and seniority were selected. Appendix 1 lists the respondents.

3.3 Empirical Process
3.3.1 Data Collection and Interview Guide
Due to semi-structured interviews, an interview guide was used (appendix 2). It was developed with inspiration from a preliminary review of previous research. After testing the questions in the first interview, the interview guide was slightly revised.

Due to covid-19 restrictions, all interviews were conducted digitally with video. Digital interviews may have had a positive effect on participation, as members of parliament have demanding schedules and digital interviews may be perceived as more flexible. The interviews lasted 40-60 minutes, were recorded in combination with notetaking and transcribed afterward.

3.3.2 Data Analysis
Thematic analysis is used. In the first order coding themes relevant to the research question were identified by looking for repetitions, metaphors, concepts and similarities/differences in the data (Bell et al., 2019). The transcribed interviews enabled us to find these themes. The identified themes were first coded individually, then compared, and lastly, the final version was shaped together. Thereafter, these concepts merged into six broader second-order themes, including one new emerging theme previous research is weak on. These later culminated into four aggregated dimensions and were analyzed based on the theoretical framework, see appendix 3. Altogether, these themes contribute to explain gender inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics.

3.4 Method Discussion
3.4.1 Trustworthiness
Trustworthiness in an interpretative study can be divided into four categories: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Bell et al., 2019), which are discussed below.

3.4.1.1 Credibility
Qualitative studies are associated with a risk of subjectivity and misconceptions by us as researchers, e.g., in the interpretation of respondents' answers (Bell et al., 2019). To alleviate this risk, both were present during all interviews. When one asked the prepared questions, the other focused on follow-up questions and notetaking. The open-ended questions made our underlying perceptions less likely to affect the respondents and helped mitigate the risk of subjective skewness (ibid). Moreover, all interviews were recorded and transcribed to avoid misquotation and enable proper coding of data.

Criticism may be directed toward digital interviews. Some researchers mean that digital interviews lessen the rapport and are less naturalistic. However, the everyday use of technology has normalized digital interactions (Bell et al., 2019). We believe increasingly so after covid-19,

forcing people to get used to video interactions. The digital format is therefore not believed to impact the study's credibility negatively.

Gender inequality can potentially be a sensitive subject. Thus, the fear of saying something wrong may influence respondents' answers. The sensitiveness of gender inequality may make male respondents feel accused of women's subordination, while female respondents may feel stigmatized for being attributed to a subordinated category (Wahl et al., 2011). To address this, all respondents are anonymous and personal data is protected.

Lastly, to allow for richer data the interviews were held in Swedish, the respondents' native language. However, creating a risk of translation errors. To mitigate this, both of us were involved in the translation and different versions were tested until the translation aligned well with the original quote.

3.4.1.2 Transferability
We have investigated a small group of politicians, hence focusing on depth rather than breadth. Therefore, the study might be more oriented to the uniqueness of the specific context, creating an empirical issue (Bell et al., 2019). It is not certain that our findings and gained knowledge will hold in another context, e.g., in other countries. Changes in parliament and society may affect the respondents' perceptions of gender inequality, making it uncertain if replicating the study in the same context would give the same results. However, the analysis's rootedness in clear themes increases transferability.

Criticism can also be directed towards the sample size of 16 interviewees. Nonetheless, an essential criterion for sample size is theoretical saturation, if that is achieved, a minimum level of sample size is less relevant (Bell et al., 2019). After the 12th interview, few new themes emerged and during the 16th interview, no new themes emerged. Hence, theoretical saturation was reached. The sample size is also motivated considering the scope of a bachelor thesis.

3.4.1.3 Dependability
To increase dependability, transparency in the research process is high. A clear research question is stated, and the research process, e.g., choice of research design, selection of respondents and analytical approach, is explained (Bell et al., 2019). Dependability also increases with different party affiliations represented, mitigating the risk that aspects only relevant for a specific party have influenced the results.

All people contacted did not accept our invitation. Thus, there is a possibility that the ones who accepted find the subject more interesting and have more knowledge on it. Different results may therefore be reached with another sample. Nonetheless, other studies on women's advancement highlight similar themes, increasing the study's dependability.

3.4.1.4 Confirmability
With an interpretative study, the result risks being biased towards our own beliefs, attitudes and experiences (Bell et al., 2019). E.g., as women we have experienced gender inequalities and may therefore unconsciously take them for granted. Moreover, our political beliefs may also have unconsciously affected our perceptions of the respondents' answers and our behavior in the interviews, e.g., facial expressions. In everything, we have tried to maintain an objective eye and put our political beliefs aside, but unconscious influence is impossible to eliminate. The extent to which this subjectivity has affected the result is difficult to determine.

3.5 Ethical Consideration

As we study a sensitive subject, all respondents are anonymous and data on party affiliation is not collected to protect respondents' integrity. Further, all respondents participated voluntarily, consented to be recorded, were informed about the research's purpose and that they were free to leave at any time without explanation. Also, all respondents signed a GDPR consent form, consenting to participate in the study and confirming that they had been informed about the anonymity and the confidential collection of data.

4. Empirics

Based on 16 qualitative interviews with members of the Swedish parliament, the following empirical data was gathered. When coding the data, six second-order categories emerged from the first order coding, creating this section's structure. Altogether, these categories explain the interviewees' perceptions of gender inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics.

4.1 Prestige & Female and Male Political Areas

Male and female representation in top positions differs between political areas. Only two women, including the current, have been ministers of finance, and only four women have been the finance committee's chairman. In the area of defense, two women have been ministers and committee chairmen. In comparison, eight women have been health & welfare ministers since the first woman was appointed in 1979. In the committee, three women have been chairmen. In the area of social insurance, five out of eight ministers and about half of the committee chairmen have been women (Swedish parliament).

Respondents express that prestige is non-static and largely dependent on party affiliation. Prestige may change depending on e.g., media coverage. M2 exemplifies, *"With the pandemic, the health & welfare committee has increased its prestige"*. However, a general perception is that the committee and ministry of finance are regarded as the most prestigious and influential. M2 further explains, *"There is actually only one department of importance, you can lose all the others, that is the ministry of finance. The one in control of the money is the one in charge"*. Contrariwise, the committee and ministry of culture, civil affairs, and health & welfare are viewed as least prestigious by most interviewees.

The interviewed women emphasized the existence of female and male areas more than the interviewed men, but exceptions exist among both genders. Soft questions, e.g., health & welfare, are perceived as feminine, while hard questions, e.g., finance and defense, are perceived as masculine. Some respondents explicitly expressed that prestige is associated with male areas and that men more often hold prestigious top positions. W13 exemplifies, *"The minister of social insurance is responsible for 2/3 of the state budget. The defense appropriation covers 52 billion I believe. That is nothing in comparison. But even so, to be minister the of defense is viewed as a heavier and more prestigious position."*. M8 opposes perceptions of more men at prestigious positions, referring to more women than men being party leaders today.

4.2 Different Prerequisites

Formal requirements are perceived to be the same for both genders. However, most respondents experience that men and women are judged according to different informal standards, especially in top positions. Female politicians face tougher expectations and demands. M7 explains, *"women need to be smarter and a little bit better than their male counterparts, while men can get away with just being likable"*. W15 elaborates, *"Men are still the norm, so they do not need to face the same questioning or prove themselves as women need to"*. W13 recalls a previous prime minister commenting that one of her greatest advantages was her voice because it sounded serious compared to more feminine voices.

Some perceive that women are expected to be serious and not smile too much, while others perceive expectations for women to be timid, happy and caring. Anna Kinberg Batra was called emotionless, humorless and boring even if she expressed herself in the same way as male party leaders. Moreover, some male respondents perceive a bigger tolerance for men's behavior and less room for mistakes and forgiveness for women.

Furthermore, a general perception is that men and women are treated differently, especially in top positions. One example mentioned is when Mona Sahlin and Fredrik Reinfeldt were portrayed in the same picture, and Mona received lots of comments regarding her designer bag while no one commented on Fredrik's designer watch. M14 recalls another example *"We received an email from a citizen starting the email with 'Ebba you are both beautiful and smart' (...) Her beauty was of no importance (...) I do not think he would have started the email in the same way if writing to a male party leader"*. W12 expresses, *"When looking into the feed of my male colleagues, I never see comments about how they look or if they have a new costume"*. W16 elaborates *"You hear journalists wondering if she has done hair extensions and discussing whether they should ask that question or not. This despite them only having three minutes with her"*. W10 states, *"It does not matter if you say great things if you wear an ugly shirt as a woman"*. She experiences that for women it is easier to be heard if appearance is managed, so no one can criticize that. Therefore, some women express a need to spend more time on appearance than men before a speech, leaving less time for other preparations. Contrariwise, M4 expresses that he has never cared about clothing.

4.3 Impact of Family Formation

Old norms about women's role in a family are perceived to decrease, making it easier to combine parenthood with a career. However, some respondents still perceive that parenthood is a barrier to women's advancement. Respondents express that because politics is not a 9-5 job, a partner's support is needed to perform a role successfully, especially for women.

Both male and female respondents believe that men and women prioritize family and career differently. E.g., female colleagues are perceived to choose to leave politics because of family, while men combine family life with political careers. Old norms and traditions are highlighted as explanations. W13 explains, *"One should be aware of the risk of entering more traditional gender roles when having children. (...) Male politicians and society are not expecting that it* (parenthood) *should affect their political careers"*. However, conflicting views exist. W11 exemplifies *"I have never heard someone say that they ended their political career because of family"*.

4.4 Informal Networks

Multiple respondents expressed the importance of access to informal networks to reach top positions in Swedish politics. Informal networks are explained as groups of people who have known each other long-time and thereby created a strong alliance of different positions within a party, in turn allowing for members of this informal group to promote each other. The networks are further explained by W13, *"Often in politics, informal networks are very prestigious and powerful" (...) They are more unknown groups, e.g., political management teams, that are not part of the ordinary hierarchical map, but that still have great influence"*.

Respondents describe that ambition, and the formal way is not enough to reach top positions because you also need informal contacts, emphasizing the importance of informal networks. W12 further emphasis the importance of networks to reach top positions, *"It is not just about working hard. You can work yourself to death, but if you do not have the networks around you making your work visible, I would say that it is hopeless"*.

Regarding access to informal networks, female respondents perceive that men have more access, while male respondents do not mention any gender differences. Female respondents perceive that the power is not where you expect, rather it is elsewhere internally. To understand this, and to gain access to the powerful informal networks, is perceived as a big challenge for women. Women also express that men tend to recruit other men due to fellowship in informal networks. W10 explains, *"The person recruiting often wants someone they feel they have*

something in common with. Usually, people say that men recruit men and so on, and I think there is a bit of truth to that. Although not that men recruit men because they are men, rather because they feel this fellowship".

Women's access to informal networks is portrayed to be restricted by women historically not having been politically active as long as men, and women still today spending more time at home caring for children. Additionally, fewer women in top positions are perceived to result in networks dominated by men. W15 states, *"If you have a leading position, the surrounding is often consisting of men in your so-called network".*

4.5 Female Rivalry

When trying to reach top positions, some respondents perceive female competition. M3 exemplifies, *"There might be women setting higher demands on other women because they themselves have had a tough time reaching their position".* Female competition is perceived to impact recruitment to top positions. W10 states, *"Sometimes there is a form of female rivalry, women that have reached higher do absolutely not want other women there to fight with. Then they might, to a higher degree, choose other men".*

Female rivalry is explained by W16, *"I believe women ruin for each other because traditionally men have been politicians, I mean on the top level. So, I believe when women are suggested* (for top positions) *they do not want lots of other women there, because it is perceived that women often ruin for other women".* Other respondents express a more general competition among all politicians regardless of gender. M4 states, *"We humans are not always generous and sometimes we climb on each other. But it is not gender specific".*

4.6 Hatred in Social Media

The social media climate politicians face is expressed as hateful and discriminating. Additionally, respondents believe that social media has increased hatred against politicians, in turn resulting in a tougher political climate. M14 describes the effect, *"I think the political climate has become much tougher the last five-ten years and kind of accelerated lately. The harsher tone has become more person-related. In social media, people cannot handle to distinguish between politics and people".*

Although both female and male politicians receive hate and discrimination in social media, most respondents perceive women as more exposed or exposed in a more sexist way. This applies to women at both lower and higher positions. W13 describes this common perception, *"It is a really huge difference. I usually describe that it is the same old misogyny but expressed at new platforms and now with the possibility to hate women anonymously in social media, which unfortunately triggers real idiots".* W15 describes the perceived sexism, *"Leading women have much tougher trolls around them that try to push on areas they believe hit women hard. Therefore, it is lots of word of abuse. It is sexual references. And that kind of comments is pretty common if you look at women's comments on social media, and you seldom see that in men's* (comments)*".*

The increased hatred towards women is perceived to affect women's possibilities to reach top positions, both as women are exposed to it themselves or notice fellow female politicians being exposed. M7 describes, *"It is nothing that encourages one to take on political office, to be exposed to threats and violence (…). So of course, threats and violence in social media can make people say no to political office or drop out".* Many respondents further believe that increased hatred affects women going into politics, in turn affecting women's possibilities to reach top positions. M4 explains, *"In the initial stage it risks leading to people not choosing to*

engage. And of course, if you do not take the initial steps, you will never reach the final steps. (...) I believe this is inhibitory for gender equality". This is emphasized as an emerging democracy problem. W13 explains, *"I would say that it is a real democracy problem. And the problem I see, and experience, is that it is not just for prominent top politicians, rather it is also young girls active in the youth parties, regardless of color of party. (...) And then, you are exposed to this* (social media climate), o*f course, it definitely affects the willingness to engage".*

Data from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention [BRÅ] (2019) confirms the respondents' perceptions of a harsh social media environment. During 2018, one of three elected representatives in Swedish politics was exposed to threats, harassments or violence, often in social media. 2% more women than men were exposed and representatives active in social media or often mentioned in the press were more exposed (Frenzel Gavell, 2019). Respondent's perceptions of women being more exposed to sexual threats are also confirmed. In 2018, women were twice as exposed to sexual threats, harassments and violence compared to men (ibid). Regarding consequences, almost one in four politicians state that their political role is affected by exposure or by worriedness of it. 42% of those exposed reported that their political role had been affected, the most common consequence being avoiding engaging or speaking up. The proportion of women whose political role had been affected was larger than the proportion of men. Additionally, women worry more than men that they, or anyone close to them, will be exposed to crimes due to their political engagement. Compared to previous years, women's worriedness increased in 2018 (ibid).

5. Analysis

In this section, the empirics are analyzed in view of the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework brought the idea of gender systems with inequality regimes and homo- and heterosociality as interacting processes, resulting in a hierarchal gender separation. Thereafter, the empirics identified six themes of gender inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics. Previous research cover five of these, while research is weak on the new emerging theme. Figure 2 illustrates each theme's connection to existing theories. However, existing theories do not categorize the themes or explain their interactions. Therefore, a new comprehensive model is introduced, explaining the interactions and the ranking of the identified inequality-producing processes.
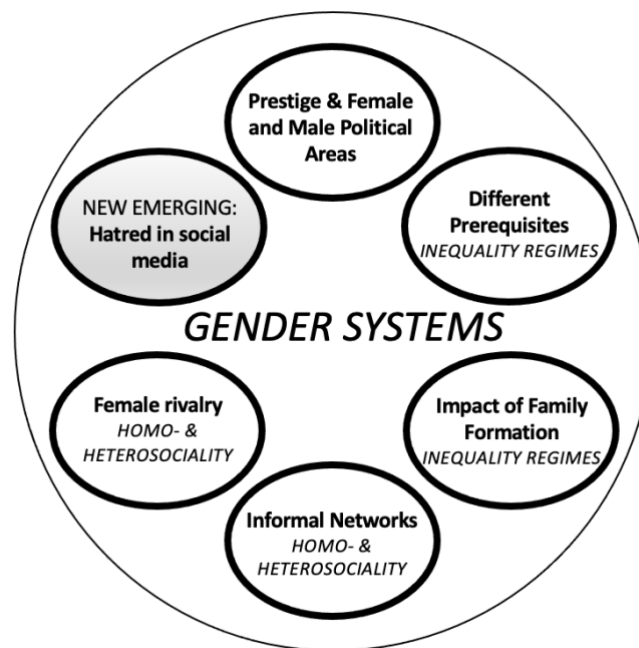
Figure 2. Analytical approach

5.1 Gender Structures

The empirics presented perceptions about prestige & female and male political areas. Third-order coding clustered these together as gender structures, which can be partly explained by Hirdman's gender systems.

The empirics highlight perceptions of male "hard" areas as more prestigious than female "soft" areas. Further, data shows men dominating in top positions in male areas, and women in female areas. Based on gender systems, the division of the genders to different political areas can be considered as an expression of the first logic of gender separation (Hirdman, 1988). Male areas being more prestigious can be explained by the second hierarchy logic, considering men as the norm and women as subordinated (ibid). As male areas are perceived as more prestigious, gender systems imply that men are the norm in Swedish politics. Therefore, the subordinated women's areas are considered less prestigious.

Furthermore, this hierarchical order of male areas being more prestigious is legitimized through the first gender separating logic (Hirdman, 1988). The gender separation to different areas allows men and women to be judged relative to one another. Additionally, as gender systems

consider men positive and women negative (ibid), male areas are perceived as more prestigious compared to female areas. Consequently, the gender separation further legitimizes men as the norm and women as subordinate. Thus, patterns where women are supposed to hold top positions in female areas and men in male areas are created and recreated in a constant process. Gender systems mean that this recreation of the ordering of genders explains why men continue to be the norm (ibid). This can further explain data showing a lack of women in top positions in political areas perceived as masculine and prestigious, e.g., finance and defense.

Empirical findings of prestige as non-static could potentially be explained by gender contracts. As gender contracts' conceptions change, the gender separations and the hierarchical gender order change (Hirdman, 1988). Thus, female areas could become more prestigious if gender contracts changed. However, the non-static character of prestige in Swedish politics seems to be more due to current political issues than changed gender conceptions, thereby not corresponding with gender systems' explanation. As the underlying conceptions have not changed, the feminine area of health & welfare becoming more prestigious during Covid-19 might only result in temporary prestige. Long term, when the pandemic vanishes, health & welfare will return to being a less prestigious feminine area. Consequently, the gender separation and hierarchical gender order do not change fundamentally. Nonetheless, as prestige changes short term, it seems like gender structures might be an inequality-producing process in Swedish national politics of more or less importance. Neither this back-and-forth level in importance can be explained by gender systems.

5.2 Women's Barriers

The empirical themes different prerequisites and family formation formed the third-order concept women's barriers. This concept can be partially explained by inequality regimes.

Female politicians are perceived to have different prerequisites, e.g., in treatment and informal demands. Based on inequality regimes, these differences demonstrate processes maintaining a gender-based inequality (Acker, 2009). Differences were often acknowledged in top positions, aligned with Acker's explanation that inequalities increase with the steepness of the organization. Additionally, men are expressed to be the norm in politics. Based on inequality regimes, this can be seen as an image that guides and justifies different organizational processes. Hence, if the image of the ideal politician is stereotypical masculine, organizational processes, e.g., recruitment, is guided to maintain gender inequalities (Acker, 2009). Thus, serving as an additional barrier to women's advancement. Further, our empirics indicate the importance of different prerequisites in relation to other processes. As several different barriers, all diminishing women's possibilities to reach top positions, exist and interact, the impact of the process is strengthened. Therefore, it is identified as a key process.

Data show conflicting views on family formation's impact on gender inequality. Some perceive family formation as a current barrier as society expects women to make family priorities that are difficult to combine with political top positions. Acker argues that such expectations build on the image of an ideal politician as someone fully focused on politics, without family demands. As this image guides organizational processes and legitimizes inequality, it becomes an impediment to changing gender inequality (Acker, 2009). Others perceive that this barrier has decreased or vanished, as norms about family roles have diminished. Thus, perceiving that family formation has a small impact on gender inequality today. Consequently, family formation is considered a barrier of decreasing importance for gender inequality in Swedish national politics. Further, although the empirics emphasize that expectations of family formation affect all women, women with children are considered especially affected. Therefore, family formation is a conditional process, being a higher barrier for women with children than for women without.

5.3 Recruitment to Top Positions

Empirical data of informal networks and female rivalry formed the third-order concept recruitment to top positions. To gain deeper understanding, this concept is analyzed by applying homo- and heterosociality.

Recruitment to top positions occurs through informal networks. It is therefore nearly impossible to reach top positions without access to these informal networks. Further, female respondents expressed that men have more access to informal networks. According to Acker (2009), this is not unexpected, since inequalities tend to be visible to those disadvantaged and invisible to those advantaged by the inequality. Homosociality explains informal networks as cultural elements in Swedish politics, characterized by men orienting towards other men (Wahl et al., 2011). This orientation occurs because male politicians identify with and trust other men, resulting in male-dominated networks. Moreover, as men have dominated politics historically, men possess the most power and have more resources to trade with (Göransson, 2007). Thereby, the male orientation continues, and male-dominated informal networks are maintained (Wahl et al., 2011). Thus, gender inequality in Swedish national politics is created and recreated with recruitment through informal networks.

Additionally, the empirics found perceptions of female rivalry. Heterosociality explains women setting higher demands or ruining for each other as women showing acts of loyalty towards men. Women do this because of their subordination from power. Thus, to better survive in Swedish politics, e.g., reach top positions, women have to confirm and orient towards men by acts of loyalty (Wahl et al., 2011). However, with heterosocial behavior, women allow men to maintain their superior position and control of power and resources. Hence, gender inequalities on higher levels are sustained through female rivalry (ibid). However, conflicting views exist regarding if rivalry is female or gender-neutral. Therefore, female rivalry is considered a relatively unimportant process.

The empirics emphasize that without informal networks, reaching top positions is impossible. Thereby, perceiving informal networks as a determining process to reach top positions. Moreover, the analysis explains how female rivalry further strengthens informal networks and their determining effect. Against this background, male-dominated informal networks are identified as the most important process in the creation of gender inequalities in top positions in Swedish national politics.

5.4 Hatred in Social Media

The new emerging theme hatred in social media, identified in interviews and secondary data, can be partly understood by gender systems.

Women are perceived to be more affected, and hatred is expressed to risk resulting in women not engaging in politics, dropping out, or avoiding top positions. Thus, this process separates women and men into different political positions. According to gender systems, gender separation further legitimizes men as the norm in Swedish politics. In turn, resulting in more men than women being chosen for top positions (Hirdman, 1988). Thereby, the order of Swedish politics is affected.

Further, hatred in social media is perceived to have increased. Gender systems would refer to changed gender contracts to explain this increase. Meaning that increased hatred is due to changed societal conceptions regarding how men and women should be (Hirdman, 1988). However, the empirics emphasize that the gender conceptions expressed have always existed. Instead, respondents perceive increased hatred to be caused by social media providing new anonymous platforms to express gender conceptions on. Based on the empirical findings, the

respondents' explanation is recognized as more realistic. If gender contracts had changed, other inequality-producing processes would likely increase as a result, since gender contracts direct gender systems (ibid). However, our findings only indicate an increase in hatred, not an overall increase. Thereby, in contrast to gender systems, increased hatred is analyzed to be due to technological changes. Nonetheless, the effect of increased hatred can still be explained by gender systems, as a recreation of the gender separation and the legitimization of men as the norm. All things equal, increased hatred thus increases gender inequality in top positions in Sweden.

Moreover, hatred in social media is perceived as a democratic problem that risks leading to fewer women engaging in politics. If female representation decreases, male dominance in Swedish politics would be further strengthened. Therefore, hatred in social media is considered a relatively important process in the overall gender systems of Swedish politics. Nor this relative importance can be explained by gender systems.

5.5 Political Environment
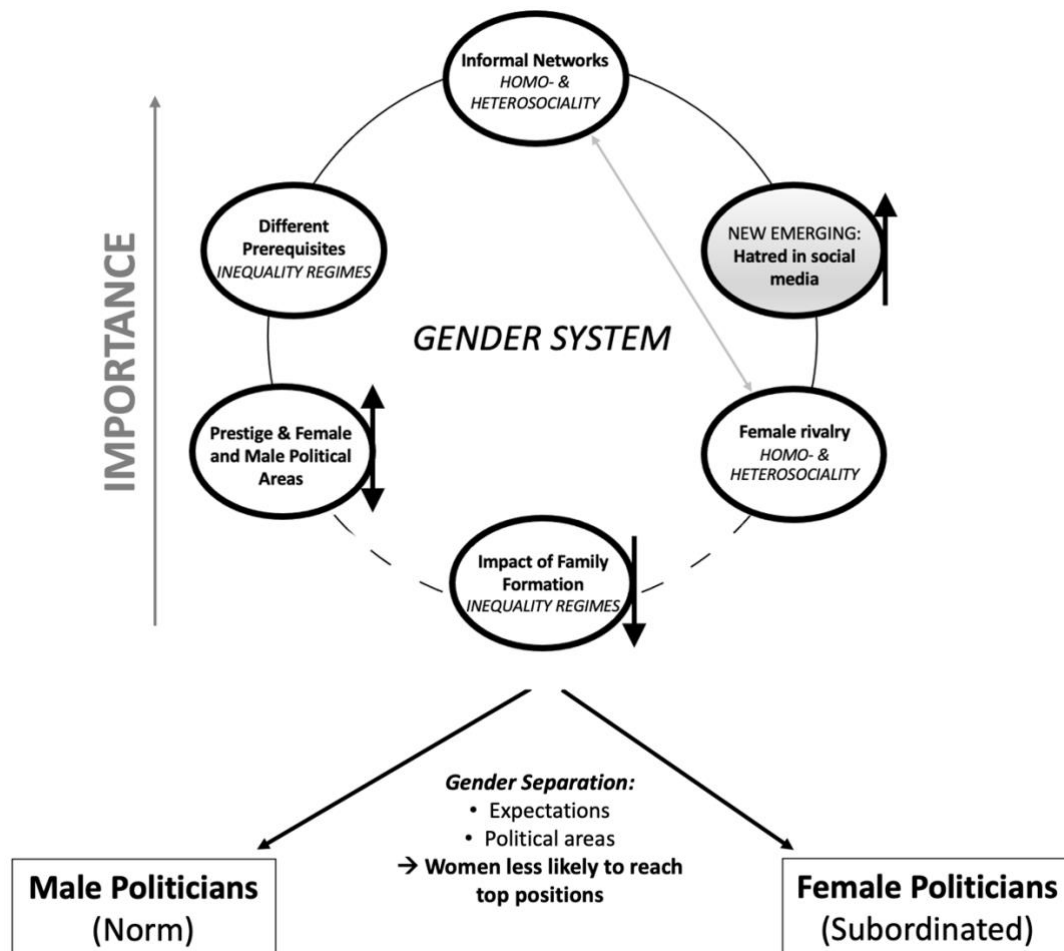
Figure 3. Gender Separation of Swedish Politics

As processes in an interacting gender system, the theoretical framework explains that each theme individually, and by interacting, affects the separation of men and women and the image of men as the norm in Swedish national politics. However, the theoretical framework cannot explain the processes' interactions and rankings. Thereby, analysis of our empirics contributes to a categorization of the interacting processes. *Informal Networks* are considered most important, as a determining process to reach top positions. Thereafter follows *Different Prerequisites,* including several barriers strengthening the process's importance. The new emerging theme, *Hatred in Social Media,* has the same ranking since hatred has increased and created a democratic problem risking to decrease female representation. The arrow represents the increased importance. Among the second-least important processes is *Prestige & Female and Male Political Areas,* due to its back-and-forth level of importance, illustrated by the double-headed arrow. *Female Rivalry* is on the same level due to contradictions if rivalry is female or gender-neutral. However, as it strengthens informal networks, illustrated by the arrow, it is still an impacting process. Lastly, *Impact of Family Formation* is considered the least important since its impact is declining. As illustrated by the dotted lines, it is also considered a conditional process, being more important for women with children than women without.

Based on our analysis, the figure illustrates a gender system of processes of different importance. Some increasing, decreasing or variating in importance. Altogether, the processes' interactions create and maintain a political environment where male politicians are the norm and female politicians are subordinated. This hierarchical gender separation results in male and female politicians facing different expectations and being considered suitable for different political areas. Consequently, women are less likely to be chosen for top positions in Swedish national politics.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Answer to Research Question

Through an interpretative study with qualitative interviews, an analysis based on a theoretical framework of gender theories and our developed model (figure 3), an answer to the following research question can be provided.

How do members of the Swedish Parliament perceive gender inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics?

Members of the Swedish parliament explain gender inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics as a gender system of six interacting inequality-producing processes. In figure 3, the processes are categorized according to their importance and interaction. Altogether, the interacting processes create and recreate a separation of male politicians as the norm and female politicians as subordinated. This gender separation results in male and female politicians facing different expectations and being considered suitable for different political areas. Consequently, women are less likely to reach top positions in Swedish national politics.
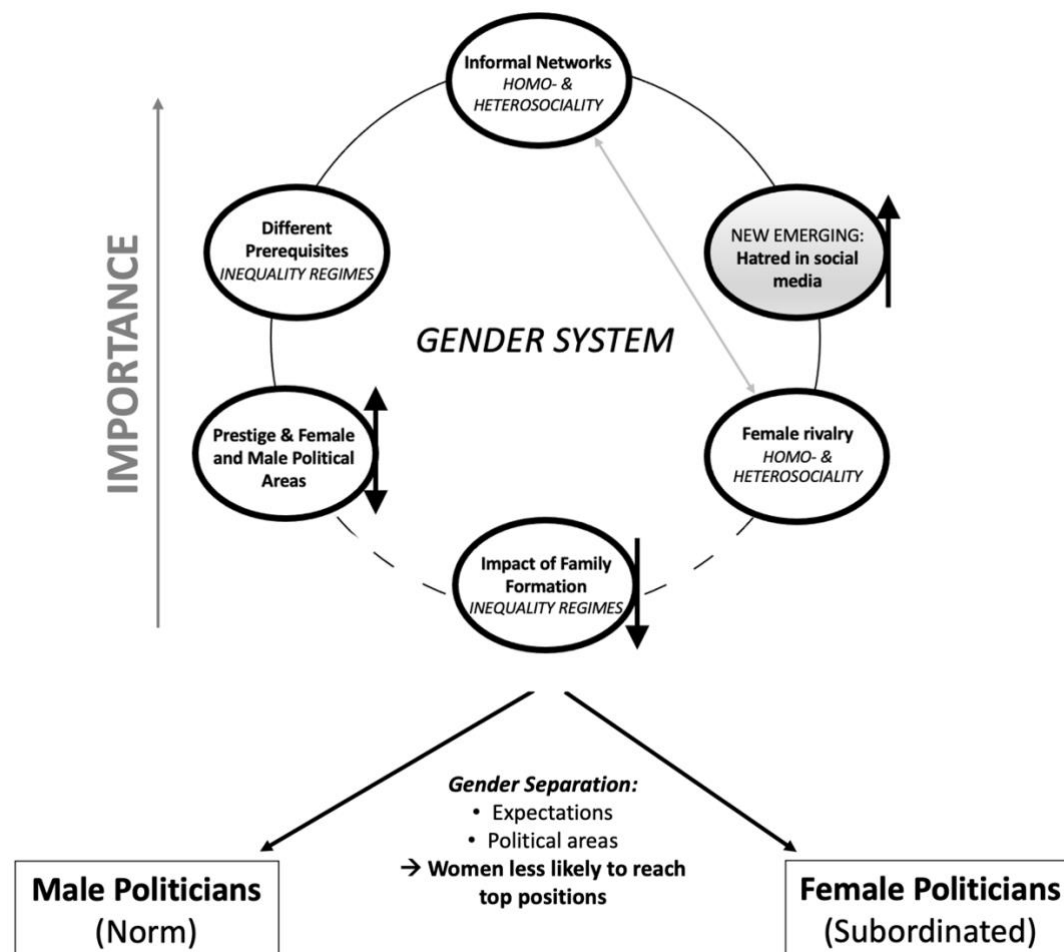

Figure 3. Gender Separation of Swedish Politics

6.2 Contribution

Aligned with this study's results, several other studies on gender inequality have concluded that barriers exist for women's advancement to top positions (Bygren et al., 2017; Erlandsson, 2019; Smith, 2002). Erikson (2017) also examined gender inequality in the Swedish parliament. What separates us from her study is our emphasis on top positions. Thereby, our contribution is the combination of empirical data and existing theory into one comprehensive model that explains gender inequality in top positions in Swedish national politics. Further, the model presents the emergence of hatred in social media as an inequality-producing process where previous research is weak. The finding of hatred in social media is strengthened by data from BRÅ (2019). Moreover, the study contributes with a categorization of how the processes relate and interact. The interacting model emphasizes how an inequality that might seem small at first glance, like sexist comments in female politicians' social media, has extensive consequences as it interacts with other inequality-producing processes. The categorization further enables more direct measures focusing on superior inequality-producing processes, rather than processes that have less impact on the creation of gender inequality. Furthermore, findings of the processes' interactions may provide an explanation for why gender inequalities prevail, despite policymakers' efforts to decrease them (Folke & Rickne, 2016).

In some respect, the study reaches similar results as the theoretical framework. This is not unexpected as our empirical themes, viewed as processes, have been analyzed through the lens of the theoretical framework. Our model's combination of the empirical findings and theoretical framework causes a symbiosis, where the theories enable understanding of the identified processes, and the processes contribute to making the theories more applicable.

Regarding implications, we hope that the model's collected description of gender inequality and its consequences on top positions in Swedish national politics will encourage attempts to improve gender equality. Improved gender equality in top positions in politics would result in better representation of women, half of the population, on Sweden's most prestigious and influential positions. In turn, improved equality contributes to increased organizational effectiveness and productivity (Drake et al., 1996). Additionally, we hope to emphasize the democratic danger of a political environment where the hateful atmosphere in social media risks decreasing female representation.

6.3 Limitations

Even if we believe that our developed model contributes to the research field and answers the research question, it has potential limitations. The model consists of themes emerging from our empirical data, which in turn has been collected from a relatively small sample. The model is thus not exhaustive, meaning that existing processes could be removed, and others added if using another sample. Furthermore, interpretation of qualitative data involves risks of subjectivity and misconceptions. Moreover, because of the interpretative approach, the study may be biased towards our own beliefs, attitudes and experiences. There is a risk that this has impacted the categorization of the inequality-producing processes. The study's limitations discussed here, and in the method section, have been considered throughout the whole study. Therefore, the study is considered to answer the research question adequately and fulfill its purpose.

6.4 Suggestions for Future research

Based on our developed model of the interaction of inequality-producing processes in Swedish national politics, it would be interesting to conduct further research. To complement our study, further quantitative research taking a deductive hypothesis testing approach is needed. For more

dependable findings, we propose a longitude method considering different political and economic circumstances.

Lastly, it would be interesting to examine other bases of inequality, e.g., ethnicity, and gender inequality in top positions on other levels of Swedish politics and in political parties. This to investigate if the same, or similar, processes and interactions can be found.

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8. Appendix

Appendix 1. List of interviewees, interview date, positions and gender

	Interview date	Position	Gender
Respondent 1	3/1/2021	Member of Committee	Man
Respondent 2	3/1/2021	Minister, Party Group Leader	Man
Respondent 3	3/2/2021	Member of Committee	Man
Respondent 4	3/3/2021	Member of Committee	Man
Respondent 5	3/3/2021	Member of Committee	Woman
Respondent 6	3/4/2021	Member of Committee	Woman
Respondent 7	3/8/2021	Member of Committee	Man
Respondent 8	3/8/2021	Committee Chairman, Political Spokesperson	Man
Respondent 9	3/10/2021	Member of Committee	Man
Respondent 10	3/11/2021	Member of Committee	Woman
Respondent 11	3/12/2021	Member of Committee	Woman
Respondent 12	3/12/2021	Vice Committee Chairman	Woman
Respondent 13	3/15/2021	Minister	Woman
Respondent 14	3/15/2021	Committee Chairman	Man
Respondent 15	3/21/2021	Other Official	Woman
Respondent 16	3/24/2021	Vice Group Leader	Woman

Appendix 2. Interview guide translated to English

Ethical aspects
• Your participation in this study is voluntarily
• In the thesis, you as respondent will be anonymized. Due to GDPR regulations, we are not allowed to gather data on party affiliation. We would therefore appreciate if you tried to not mention your specific party.
• You may leave the interview at any time without further explanation.
• Do we have your permission to record the interview? This to transcribe the interview afterwards for the analysis.
• Do you have any questions for us before we start?

Background
• Can you in short describe your role as a member of the parliament?
   • Do you have leadership responsibility in your current role?
   • Have you had leadership responsibility in a previous political role?

• For how long have you worked with politics on a professional level? (Professional level = local, regional, national or as employed in a party)
• Do you have any other professional experiences outside of politics?

General Questions
• Do you think that society as a whole is equal?
• What positions do you consider as top positions in national politics?
   • Are there any top positions that are seen as less prestigious than others?
   • Are there specific committees or ministries that are seen as more or less prestigious?

• Do you have, or have you had, ambitions to climb even higher in your political career?
   • Do you think that men and women differ in their ambition to reach top positions?
   • Do you think that men and women differ in self-confidence and self-esteem to cope with the demands on top positions?

Gender Equality
• In your experience, do women and men differ in their possibilities to reach top positions in national politics?
   • Why/why not

• In your experience, do you think that women and men's possibilities to reach top positions changes after having children?
   • Why/why not? What is the effect of family formation? Is any of the genders more affected by family formation?

• Are different demands/requirements put on women and men in national politics, e.g., experience, education, competence? Do the requirements differ for top positions?
   • Do the genders face different demands from media and voters?
   • Do you experience the climate in social media to be the same for both genders or is there a difference? E.g., in threats, jeers, discrimination etc.

• Do you experience that the differences in women and men's possibilities to reach top positions is bigger in top positions that are more prestigious compared to less prestigious top positions?

• In your experience, does the gender of the recruiter affect an individual's possibility to reach a top position? E.g., if women tend to recruit other women to a higher extent than men and vice versa.

• In your opinion, do female and male areas exist in politics?
- If yes, are the demands on men in a male area different from the demands on women in male areas and vice versa?
- In your experience, are recruitment to different political areas based on individual's interest or is it governed by unwritten rules of gender coded areas?

Leader-ideal
• In your opinion, what characteristics should a good leader in politics possess?
• In your opinion, do general perceptions exist of how an ideal leader should be?
- Do you see a difference regarding what ideals that are important for internal leaders in the party compared to leaders targeting voters and receiving more media attention? What are those ideals?
- In your experience, are those ideals more difficult to achieve for any of the genders?

Discrimination
• Have you experienced that men and women have been treated differently in their political work, e.g., different attitudes?
- If yes, in what way? Do you think that this affects women's possibilities to reach top positions in politics?
- If no, do you think others have experienced it?

Appendix 3. Coding of empirics

Gender Systems

3d order	**Gender Structures**	**Women's barriers** (Inequality Regimes)		**Recruitment to higher positions** (Homosociality & Heterosociality)	**Hatred in social media**

2nd order	Perceptions about prestige & female and male political areas	Perceptions about different prerequisites	Perceptions about the impact of family formation	Perceptions about informal networks	Perceptions about female rivalry	Perceptions about hatred in social media

1st order

Gender Structures	Different prerequisites	Family formation	Informal networks	Female rivalry	Hatred in social media
Committee and ministry of finance is most prestigious and influential.

Prestige differ between parties.

Prestige is non-static.

Soft questions considered feminine. Hard questions considered masculine.

Male questions more prestigious.

Women underrepresented in "hard" top positions (finance & defense) | Same formal requirements.

Men and women judged according to different standards and treated differently.

Women acting masculine are criticized.

Women acting feminine are criticized.

Less tolerance for women's mistakes.

Women are commented on looks, men on politics.

Women's appearance important to be taken seriously. Men's appearance not important. | Easier to combine family and politics today compared to previously.

Parenthood a barrier for women's advancement to top positions. Not for men.

Partner important for women's political performance.

Women prioritize family. Men combine family and politics.

Old norms still prevail. | Informal networks requirement for top positions.

Informal networks are unknown. Not visible for everyone.

Informal networks are powerful, prestigious, influential.

Men dominate informal networks. Hard for women to access.

Men choose men for top positions.

Women have not been in politics as long as men, therefore male dominance in informal networks. | There is female rivalry.

Women ruin for each other.

Women set higher demands on other women compared to men.

Women do not want other women in the top.

Rivalry is gender-neutral. | Climate in social media is tough. Hate and discriminating comments are common and have increased.

Social media and being anonymous have increased hate towards politicians.

Women are more exposed to hate, discrimination, sexism.

Misogyny is common.

Social media climate affects women's willingness to engage and take on top positions.

Social media climate towards women is a democracy problem. |