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## SYMPOSIUM: GENDER AND ECONOMICS

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### Diversity in Tastes, Values, and Preferences: Comment on Jonung and Ståhlberg

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**A COMMENT ON: CHRISTINA JONUNG AND ANN-CHARLOTTE STÅHLBERG, “REACHING THE TOP: ON GENDER BALANCE IN THE ECONOMICS PROFESSION,”** *ECON JOURNAL WATCH* 5(2), MAY 2008: 174-192. [LINK](#).

#### ABSTRACT

**SWEDISH PROPAGANDA HAS LONG MAINTAINED THE SUPERIORITY OF THE** Swedish model of the welfare state, and Swedish social scientists typically reflect and support this world view. It is thus rare for publications to present evidence that raises doubts about the received wisdom, and even rarer for such challenges to come from Swedish scholars. Jonung and Ståhlberg's analysis of continued male dominance in the economics profession in Sweden is thus most welcome. As they point out, Sweden has invested heavily in “gender equality” and family-friendly policies.

The cross-national comparisons in Table 2 are the most valuable element in Jonung and Ståhlberg's paper. The comparisons show that the situation in Sweden, a relatively tiny and socially homogeneous society, is very close to that in at least four other affluent modern liberal societies that have also invested heavily in equal opportunities policies: the USA, Britain, Canada and Australia. Indeed, their analysis suggests that in some respects Sweden lags well behind these other countries as regards women's penetration into the economics profession. In Sweden, only one-fifth of assistant lecturer/lecturer posts in economics are filled by women, compared to one-third in the four other countries. The USA and Britain have the highest proportion of full professors of economics who are women: 8-9% compared to 5-6% in Sweden, Canada and Australia. This percentile difference is small but substantively large and important given that Britain and the USA have always had far fewer of the family-friendly policies that are claimed to help

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women to remain in their jobs after having children and to achieve work-life balance. On this evidence, the institutional context is far less important than Jonung and Ståhlberg want to believe. In fact, as they admit, family-friendly policies are probably counter-productive as they allow women to choose good work-life balance instead of a male-style work-centered career.

In seeking an explanation for these outcomes, Jonung and Ståhlberg rely on existing economic theories. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, explanations must start with the diversity of lifestyle preferences and choices in modern societies, especially in the very large multicultural societies of the USA and Britain. This diversity is increasing with globalization.

As a sociologist, I have been working on issues of life goals, priorities, preferences, values, and gender-balance for some time. I was invited to participate in this symposium by the editor of this journal, who evidently knew something of my “take” on such matters. He encouraged me to use the opportunity to address findings and interpretations from my sociological perspective.

Within sociology, “preference theory” provides an explanation for the continued dominance of men in the highest-grade jobs and occupations, and for the relative lack of change in the standard measures of “gender equality” in recent years. Economists tend to think of behavior as reflecting ‘revealed preferences’. In contrast, sociologists ask direct questions about values, priorities, preferences and life goals, and then examine how stated preferences and priorities play out in actual choices and behavior. My preference theory rests on a review of the most recent evidence to identify the three main types of lifestyle preference in modern societies. I have also shown that in some societies, the gap between preferences and behavior is wide; in others it can be small.

### PREFERENCE THEORY

Preference theory is a theory for explaining and predicting women's choices between market work and family work. It is historically-informed, empirically-based, multidisciplinary, prospective rather than retrospective in orientation, and applicable in all rich modern societies (Hakim 2000).

Lifestyle preferences are defined as causal factors which thus need to be monitored in modern societies. Other social attitudes, such as patriarchal values and societal norms, have been found to be either unimportant as predictors of behavior or as having only a small marginal impact, by creating a particular climate of public opinion on women's roles (Hakim 2003b, 2004b). The theory has been tested with national surveys in Britain and Spain (Hakim 2002, 2003a) and the three lifestyle preference groups have been identified using existing survey data for several other modern economies.

Preference theory predicts a polarization of work-lifestyles, as a result of the

**Table 1: The Four Central Tenets of Preference Theory**

1. Five separate historical changes in society and in the labor market which started in the late twentieth century are producing a qualitatively different and new scenario of options and opportunities for women. The five changes do not necessarily occur in all modern societies, and do not always occur together. Their effects are cumulative. The five causes of a new scenario are:

- \* the contraceptive revolution which, from about 1965 onwards, gave sexually active women reliable control over their own fertility for the first time in history;
- \* the equal opportunities revolution, which ensured that for the first time in history women had equal access to all positions, occupations and careers in the labor market. In some countries, legislation prohibiting sex discrimination went further, to give women equal access to housing, financial services, public services, and public posts;
- \* the expansion of white-collar occupations, which are far more attractive to women than most blue-collar occupations;
- \* the creation of jobs for secondary earners, people who do not want to give priority to paid work at the expense of other life interests; and
- \* the increasing importance of attitudes, values and personal preferences in the life-style choices of affluent modern societies.

2. Women are heterogeneous in their preferences and priorities on the conflict between family and employment. In the new scenario they are therefore heterogeneous also in their employment patterns and work histories. These preferences are set out, as ideal types, in Table 2. The size of the three groups varies in rich modern societies because public policies usually favor one or another group (see Table 3).

3. The heterogeneity of women's preferences and priorities creates conflicting interests between groups of women: sometimes between home-centered women and work-centered women, sometimes between the middle group of adaptive women and women who have one firm priority (whether for family work or employment). The conflicting interests of women have given a great advantage to men, whose interests are comparatively homogeneous; this is one cause of patriarchy and its disproportionate success.

4. Women's heterogeneity is the main cause of women's variable responses to social engineering policies in the new scenario of modern societies. This variability of response has been less evident in the past, but it has still impeded attempts to predict women's fertility and employment patterns. Policy research and future predictions of women's choices will be more successful in future if they adopt the Preference Theory perspective and first establish the distribution of preferences between family work and employment in each society.

Source: Hakim, *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century*, Oxford University Press 2000.

diversity in women's sex-role preferences and the three related models of family roles. It argues that in prosperous modern societies, women's preferences become a central determinant of life choices—in particular the choice between an emphasis on activities related to children and family life or an emphasis on employment and competitive activities in the public sphere. The social-structural and economic environment still constrains women's choices to some extent, but social-structural factors are of declining importance - most notably social class.<sup>2</sup> Preference theory forms part of the new stream of sociological theory that emphasizes ideational change as a major cause of social behavior. Individualization frees people from the influence of social class, nation, and family, and agency becomes more important as a determinant of behavior. Men and women not only gain the freedom to choose their own biography, values and lifestyle, increasingly they are forced to make their own decisions, because there are no universal certainties or collectively agreed conventions, no fixed models of the good life, as in traditional societies. Preference theory can be seen as an empirically-based statement of the choices women and men actually make in rich modern societies. In sum, preference theory predicts diversity in lifestyle choices, and even a polarization of lifestyles among *both* men and women, although the initial emphasis has been on women.

Along with all the social sciences, economics tends toward a variable-centered analysis, which focuses on the average outcome, the modal pattern, and the central tendency. Such approaches tend to obscure the underlying diversity of family models and lifestyle choices. Those underlying realities only emerge clearly in studies using person-centered analysis, which is still uncommon, even in sociology and uses a different methodology (Cairns, Bergman and Kagan 1998 and Magnusson 1998).

Preference theory specifies the historical context in which core values become important predictors of behavior. Five historical changes, listed in Table 1, collectively produce a qualitatively new scenario for women in affluent modern societies in the 21st century, giving them options that were not previously available.

Reviews of the research evidence for the last three decades, particularly for the USA and Britain (Hakim 2000; 2004a), show that once genuine choices are open to them, women choose between three different lifestyles: home-centered, work-centered or adaptive (see Table 2). These divergent preferences are found at all levels of education and ability, in all social classes and income groups. Social origins become less important than motivation, personal life goals, attitudes, and values.

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<sup>2</sup> The declining importance of social class as a predictor of behavior and choices in the 21st century is most obvious in politics—as illustrated by the fact that personal values, rather than social class, differentiated support for Al Gore and George W. Bush in the closely contested USA election of 2000.

**Table 2: Classification of Women’s Work-lifestyle Preferences in the 21st Century**

Home-centered	Adaptive	Work-centered
20% of women varies 10%-30%	60% of women varies 40%-80%	20% of women varies 10%-30%
Family life and children are the main priorities throughout life.	This group is most diverse and includes women who want to combine work and family, plus drifters and unplanned careers.	Childless women are concentrated here. Main priority in life is employment or equivalent activities in the public arena: politics, sport, art, etc.
Prefer <i>not</i> to work.	Want to work, but <i>not</i> totally committed to work career.	Committed to work or equivalent activities.
Qualifications obtained as cultural capital.	Qualifications obtained with the intention of working	Large investment in qualifications/training for employment/other activities.
Number of children is affected by government social policy, family wealth, etc. Not responsive to employment policy	This group is <i>very</i> responsive to government social policy, employment policy, equal opportunities policy/propaganda, economic cycle/recession/growth, etc. Including: income tax and social welfare benefits, educational policies, school timetables, child care services, public attitude towards working women, legislation promoting female employment, trade union attitudes to working women, availability of part-time work and similar work flexibility, economic growth and prosperity, and institutional factors generally.	Responsive to economic opportunity, political opportunity, artistic opportunity, etc. Not responsive to social/family policy.
Family values: caring, sharing, no-competitive, communal, focus on cohesion	Compromise between two conflicting sets of values.	Marketplace values: competitive rivalry, achievement orientation, individualism, excellence.

Source: Hakim, *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century*, Oxford University Press 2000.

The three preference groups are set out, as sociological ideal-types, in Table 2, with estimates of the relative sizes of the three groups in societies, such as Britain and the USA, where public policy does not much affect the distribution. In this case, the distribution of women across the three groups corresponds to a “normal” statistical distribution of responses to the family-work conflict.<sup>3</sup> In practice, in most societies, public policy is biased towards one group or another, by accident or by design, so that the exact percentages vary between modern societies, with inflated numbers of work-centered women or home-centered women. For example, Swedish fiscal and social policy appear to have squeezed home-centered women to a tiny group, and have inflated the size of the work-centered group, but the three groups are still identifiable in substantial numbers (see Table 3 on next page).

*Work-centered women* are a minority, despite the massive influx of women into higher education, and into professional and managerial occupations, in the last three decades. Work-centered people (men and women) are focused on competitive activities in the public sphere, in careers, sport, politics, or the arts. Family life is fitted around their work, and many of these careerist women remain childless, even when married. Qualifications and training are obtained as a career investment rather than as an insurance policy, as in the adaptive group. The majority of men are work-centered, compared to only a minority of women, even women in professional occupations (Hakim 1998, 221-34; 2003a, 183-4). Preference theory predicts that men will retain their dominance in the labor market, politics, and other competitive activities, because only a minority of women are prepared to prioritize their jobs (or other competitive activities) in the same way as men. In the long run, it is work-centered people who are most likely to become high achievers in demanding occupations (Hakim 2006).

*Adaptive women* prefer to combine employment and family work without giving a fixed priority to either. They want to enjoy the best of both worlds. They are generally the largest group among women, and are found in substantial numbers in most occupations. Certain occupations, such as teaching, are attractive to women because they facilitate a more even work-family balance. The great majority of women who transfer to part-time work after they have children are adaptive women, who seek to devote as much time and effort to their family work as to their paid jobs. In some countries, such as the USA and southern European countries, and in certain occupations, part-time jobs are still rare, so women must choose other types of job, if they work at all. For example seasonal jobs, temporary work, or school-term-time jobs all offer a better work-family balance than the typical full-time job, especially if commuting is also involved. When flexible jobs are not available, adaptive women may take ordinary full-time jobs, or else withdraw from paid employment temporarily.

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<sup>3</sup> The distribution set out in Table 2 is based on an extensive review of the empirical evidence for the last two decades presented in Hakim (2000), and has been reconfirmed by subsequent national survey research in European countries (Hakim 2003a), in the USA (Hattery 2001, 170), and in other countries (Table 3).

**Table 3: National Distributions of Lifestyle Preferences  
Among Women and Men**

	Family centered	Adaptive	Work centered
<i>Britain</i>			
all women aged 16+	17	69	14
women in full-time work	14	62	24
women in part-time work	8	84	8
all men aged 16+	?	<48	52
men in full-time work	?	<50	50
men in part-time work	?	<66	34
<i>Spain</i>			
all women aged 18+	17	70	13
women in full-time work	4	63	33
women in part-time work	7	79	14
all men aged 18+	?	<60	40
men in full-time work	?	<56	44
<i>Belgium-Flanders</i>			
all women	10	75	15
women with partners	12	75	13
all men	2	23	75
men with partners	1	22	77
<i>Germany</i>			
women	14	65	21
men	33		67
<i>Czech Republic</i>			
all women aged 20-40	17	70	13
women in employment	14	69	17
wives aged 20-40	14	75	11
<i>Sweden</i>			
women in 1955 birth cohort: actual lifestyle choices by age 43 (1998)	4	64	32
<i>Japan</i>			
Ideal lifecourse of unmarried women			
1987	37	55	8
2002	21	69	10
2005	20	70	10

Source: Data for Britain and Spain, 1999, extracted from Tables 3.14 and 3.15 in Hakim (2003a, 85,

87). Data for Belgium-Flanders extracted from Corijn and Hakim (forthcoming) based on a 2002/3 survey. Data for Germany extracted from Bertram et al (2005). Data for Czech Republic from personal communication from Beatrice Manea, based on a November 2005 survey. Data for Sweden extracted from Huang et al (2007) reporting analysis of a longitudinal dataset. Data for Japan from National Institute of Population and Social Security regular surveys of Views of the Unmarried about Marriage and Family in Japan provided by Professor Akihide Inaba, Tokyo Metropolitan University.

ily. Adaptive women and men are the group most interested in schemes offering work-life balance and family-friendly employment benefits, and will gravitate towards careers, occupations and employers offering these advantages.

The third group, *home-centered or family-centered women*, is also a minority among women, and a relatively invisible one in the Western world, given the current political and media focus on working women and high achievers. Home-centered women prefer to give priority to private life and family life after they marry. They are most inclined to have larger families (Hakim 2003c), and these women avoid paid work after marriage unless the family is experiencing financial problems. They do not necessarily invest less in qualifications, because the educational system functions as a marriage marketplace as well as a training institution. Despite the elimination of the sex differential in educational attainment, an increasing percentage of wives in the USA and Europe marry a man with substantially better qualifications, and the likelihood of marrying a graduate spouse is hugely increased if the woman herself has obtained a degree (Hakim 2000, 193-222; Blossfeld and Timm 2003).<sup>4</sup> This may be why women remain less likely to choose vocational courses with a direct economic value, and are still more likely to take courses in the arts, humanities, or languages, which provide cultural capital but have lower earnings potential. This group of workers is most likely to drop out of demanding careers relatively early in adult life. Surveys suggest this group is tiny among men (see Table 3).

Given this diversity of lifestyle choices among women and men, and the fact that the three groups cut across ability and education levels, it is predictable that men will continue to predominate at the highest levels of any occupation, and the economics profession is no exception. In addition, modern economics values and rewards mathematical abilities.

### INTELLECTUAL ABILITY ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

Research by psychologists rounds out any explanation for the continuing predominance of men in the highest grades of most professions, long after equal-

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4 Studies of 'self-service' marriage markets in modern societies show that most women are concerned to marry a man with equal or better education (and thus equal or better earnings potential), whereas most men place far less weight on this criterion in their choice of spouse. The majority of men with education beyond basic secondary education marry women with less education, because men give more weight to physical attractiveness (Hakim 2000, 193-222).

opportunities policies reconfigured expectations of the “proper” roles for men and women.

A study that was started in 1971 in the USA evolved into a 50-year longitudinal study of more than 5000 intellectually talented individuals identified over a 25 year period. The Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth selected youngsters from the top 3% on a conventional attainment test administered in secondary schools at around age 12-13. In practice, the study covers all intellectually precocious young people, whether verbally or mathematically talented. They were followed up for 35 years, well into adult life, with many followed up to age 47-48.

The results of the study (Lubinski and Benbow 2006; Park, Lubinski and Benbow 2007) show that even among exceptionally talented people entering the workforce after the equal opportunities revolution, there are still large sex differences in interests, values, and preferences. Using numerous measures of ability, sex differences in math and verbal ability were small or non-existent. However males had a greater “tilt” towards quantitative ability rather than verbal ability, and males scored higher than females on all measures of ability (Park, Lubinski and Benbow 2007, 951). Sex differences in income were explained entirely by hours worked. There were substantial differences in hours worked, and in the hours people would be willing to work in their *ideal* job, with many women choosing to be full-time homemakers or to work part-time only, despite apparently being highly qualified. Even within this exceptionally talented sample, ability level remained a predictor of earnings, achieving tenure at a top 50 USA university, and earning patents. The researchers note that, in all fields, notable accomplishments are rarely achieved by people who work 40 hours a week or less, and that world class performers often work 60-80 hours a week. They conclude that similarly able people will still make different lifestyle and career choices, and they note that all the sample were similarly satisfied with their current careers and life in general at age 33 (Lubinski and Benbow 2006, 334).

These results may reflect sex-role socialization as well as abilities and lifestyle preferences. However they suggest that sex-role differentiation is not eliminated by equal-opportunities policies regarding roles in public life. Even within this exceptionally talented group, men worked longer hours and had higher earnings than women, many of whom chose to be full-time mothers and homemakers.

### **WORK-LIFE BALANCE VERSUS CAREERIST GOALS**

Case studies of professions that employ equal numbers of men and women also reveal the limited impact of educational qualifications in isolation (Hakim, 1998, 221-234; 2003a, 183-4). Across modern societies, pharmacy now employs equal numbers of men and women, and also employs unusually high numbers of ethnic minority people. Due to chronic labor shortages, it is widely agreed

that the profession is completely free of sex and race discrimination. Studies of the profession in the USA, Canada, Britain, and other European countries still show a large degree of *job* segregation within the occupation, however. Women gravitate towards jobs that are local, can be done part-time or for short periods, and to jobs with fixed hours of work that can be fitted around family life. Men in the profession gravitate towards ownership of independent pharmacies, which entail the long work hours and additional responsibilities of self-employment and running a small business. Other men work towards management jobs in the large retail chains, again accepting long hours, greater demands, more responsibility, and less flexibility. Given labor shortages and the absence of sex discrimination in the profession, women are free to choose whatever working arrangement they prefer. So sex differentials in outcomes reflect quite different priorities and life goals. In Britain, there is no earnings difference between full-time and part-time workers in the profession, but there is a large 27% earnings differential between women and men working full-time, close to the average pay gap for all fully integrated professions in Britain (Hakim 1998, 226-7). Case study research shows that these sex differentials in the professions are due to substantively different work orientations among men and women, even among university graduates (Hakim 2000; 2004a, 178-182), and hence to people choosing very different career paths. In practice, most women choose work-life balance, while most men focus more strongly on success in their career.

This is the reason why studies find women far less likely than men to seek and ask for promotion, responsibility, and pay rises (Babcock and Laschever 2003). Women ask instead for more convenient or shorter work hours, factors that improve work-life balance rather than maximize career success (Hakim, 2004a, 90-97; McGovern et al, 2008, 120-122).

Academic studies almost invariably omit to measure personal lifestyle preferences and values—as distinct from the acceptance of societal norms, which is widely covered by opinion polls and the like (Hakim 2003b; 2004b). So the impact of lifestyle preferences is routinely overlooked or attributed to other more easily measured factors, especially in studies seeking to explain the pay gap.

### THE ASSUMED SUPERIORITY OF WESTERN WELFARE STATES

There seems to be no doubt that family-friendly policies are popular among many women, and make it much easier for them to combine paid jobs with family work. What is doubtful is that such policies produce gender equality in the workforce. The latest research evidence is that family-friendly policies do not make any major positive difference to gender equality in the labor market, as indicated by levels of occupational segregation, the pay gap, and the glass ceiling. On the contrary, they exacerbate these problems. This conclusion has now been drawn by

several scholars working independently (Charles and Grusky 2004; Hakim 2004a; Jacobs and Gerson 2004). The research evidence suggests that it is unrealistic to expect that women could soon achieve half of the top jobs.

Cross-national comparative studies by the ILO, OECD, EC (Anker 1998; Melkas and Anker 1997, 1998; OECD 2002; European Commission 2002, 18-45), and by academic scholars (see the reviews in Charles 1998; Hakim 2004a, 170-182; Charles and Grusky 2004), have been indicating that some well-established assumptions are myth rather than fact. We now know that there is no direct link between occupational segregation and the pay gap; the association is coincidental rather than causal, and the two are independent social developments or constructions. Furthermore, economic and social development is not causally linked to occupational segregation or the pay gap; modern societies do not necessarily have better scores on these two indicators of gender equality in the workforce. The country with the lowest level of occupational segregation in the world is China, not Sweden, as we have been led to believe. Many countries in the Far East have lower levels of occupational segregation than in western Europe. The lowest pay gap in the world is not found in Sweden, as so many claim, but in Swaziland and Sri Lanka. Most important, higher levels of female employment in a society produce higher levels of occupational segregation and a larger pay gap; they do not improve gender equality in the workforce, as previously assumed, but worsen it. Even within western Europe, countries with the lowest female employment rates tend to have the smallest pay gaps, as illustrated by Portugal and Spain compared to Finland and Germany.

Even more disconcerting is the evidence that family-friendly policies generally *reduce* gender equality in the workforce, rather than raising it, as is so often assumed. This conclusion has now been drawn simultaneously by several scholars working independently (Charles and Grusky 2004, 5-6, 10-11, 37, 297, 302-4; Hakim 2004a, 183; Hunt 2002; Jacobs and Gerson 2004, 7, 177). In particular, Sweden's generous family-friendly policies have created a larger glass ceiling problem than exists in the USA, where there is a general lack of such policies (Albrecht, Björklund, Vroman 2003; Henrekson and Dreber 2004). Women are more likely to achieve senior management jobs in the USA than in Sweden: 11% versus 1.5% respectively (Rosenfeld and Kalleberg 1990; see also Wright, Baxter and Birkelund 1995; Henrekson and Dreber 2004). There is no doubt that family-friendly policies help women to combine paid jobs with family work. What they do not do is solve the problem of gender inequality in the workforce.

What these research results suggest is that Jonung and Ståhlberg's expectations are based on out-of-date and discredited assumptions about the impact of social engineering in Sweden. As noted earlier, their own research indicates that the institutional context is far less important than social policy experts would have us believe.

## NEW THEORIES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Pulling all these threads together, we have a complete explanation for continuing male dominance in the professions—including economics—in the absence of sex discrimination. At the highest echelons, ability alone is not enough. Long hours of work, motivation, and a strong career focus also count heavily. Even among the most able and talented, we find that tastes, values, and lifestyle preferences differ. Women are more likely to choose work-life balance, while men are more likely to value career success. Jonung and Ståhlberg claim the gender discrepancy in career attainment is largest in economics. The gender gap is likely to be even larger in engineering and other male-dominated disciplines that prioritize mathematical skills. In Britain, decades of effort to push more women into science and engineering courses and occupations have had little success, and the gender gap remains large at all levels. Similarly, in the USA, women comprise only 10% of tenure-track professors in electrical engineering and similar subjects (Somers 2008). In all countries, the most enduring segregation of men and women is in the educational system, long before people enter the labor market, as women continue to prefer courses in the arts, humanities and social sciences while men are more likely to choose courses in maths, science and engineering. Sex differences in tastes emerge early and are resistant to attempts to impose politically correct choices because sexism is no longer the dominant factor in young people's lives.

Like engineering, economics puts a premium on quantitative and mathematical skills, and hence attracts more men than women into the profession. In Britain (and most countries) economics graduates are mostly male, while sociology graduates are mostly female.

It is time to accept that the equal opportunities revolution has served its purpose, and the feminist goal of 50/50 sex ratios in all occupations and jobs is unrealistic, given the diversity of tastes, values, and preferences among men and women. Social engineering attempts to impose identical outcomes and eliminate occupational segregation completely cannot succeed, being based on selective research evidence and incorrect assumptions. My prediction that men will continue to dominate in most occupations and the highest grade positions is not appealing, even to me, but it is based on the research evidence and is realistic. Social science is about understanding the real world, not about reinforcing fantasies and wishful thinking.

Jonung and Ståhlberg's metaphor of the "leaking pipe" is not appropriate, and they fail to appreciate that their own careerist values are not shared by all adult women. The more appropriate perspective is the 'competing values' framework of preference theory. Social scientists have to learn to recognize, and support diversity in values, world views, and lifestyles, most especially in multi-cultural societies.

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