Discrimination: Swedish study shows job applicants with foreign names receive far fewer responses

Sweden is often lauded for its gender equality. The gender gap in unpaid (house)work is narrow. Wide access to affordable, state-subsidised daycare, together with the right for parents of young children to work part time, means that women's participation in the labour market is relatively high. And parental leave policies are generous.

At the same time, among the 38 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the employment gap between people born in Sweden and immigrants is among the widest. This impacts a large proportion of the Swedish population. One in five people in Sweden were born abroad and an even larger share of Swedes have at least one foreign-born parent.

To understand this dichotomy, my colleagues and I looked at how discrimination in the Swedish labour market varies by gender, ethnicity and parenthood. I found that having a name deemed to sound foreign results in applicants receiving far fewer responses than people with typically Swedish-sounding names.

Sweden is highly rated for its measures promoting gender equality in the workplace.

To study hiring discrimination, you can ask workers about their personal, and subjective, experiences. However, using only survey or register data to adequately measure discrimination across the labour market is difficult, if not impossible.

An alternative method, adopted by both by sociologists and economists, is what is called a correspondence audit. Nowadays this mostly involves researchers submitting written applications from fictitious candidates to real advertised job openings. The researchers then record the responses received from employers.

For our study, we submitted 5,641 applications in response to job ads on the Swedish Employment Agency's website, between 2013 and 2020. In total, our applications covered up to 20 occupations. These varied in terms of qualification levels required, industry and sector, as well as gender spread and ethnic diversity.

We used common Swedish names to signal the majority ethnicity (white Swedish). And we used common Slavic and Arabic names as foreign-sounding names – these represent some of the largest foreign-born population groups, and visible ethnic minorities, in Sweden.

I found that applicants with foreign names receive substantially fewer positive responses to their job applications than those with typically Swedish names. The difference in the callback rates between applicants with Swedish and foreign-sounding names is almost 15 percentage points. In other words, if someone with a Swedish-sounding name sent out 10 applications, someone with a foreign-sounding name would have to send out 15 to expect the same number of callbacks.

What's more, among applicants with foreign names, we found that men are contacted less often by employers than women.

In a smaller study on a subsample of about 2,100 applications, we found no evidence of systematic discrimination based on gender or parenthood status.

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These results broadly echo recent research from Europe. While previous findings on gender discrimination are somewhat diverse – depending on the country and occupational context – many recent European studies do not show discrimination against women in general. In fact, there is some evidence of hiring discrimination in favour of women.

Discrimination against job applicants with foreign-sounding names, on the other hand, is well documented. There are also several studies, from the Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Finland), that show that men with foreign-sounding names face greater hiring discrimination than women.

The issue is complex. Other European studies have variously not found ethnic discrimination to differ by gender, or have shown discrimination patterns to vary – depending on the gender composition of the occupation and the backgrounds (ethnic or racial) of the applicants.

We focused on the early stage of the formal hiring process, but not final hiring decisions. Discrimination can, of course, also take place at every other phase, be that in terms of who gets promotions, training opportunities; who is paid what wages and who is let go.

These findings imply that discrimination against job applicants with foreign-sounding names contributes to ethnic inequality in Sweden, particularly for men. If men with names deemed to be foreign receive fewer responses to job applications, they are probably less likely than men with names deemed Swedish to end up in an interview and to be hired.