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INTERVIEW

**BARBRO
EHNBOM**

MENTOR AND PIONEER



BARBRO EHNBOM

BOOSTING WOMEN TO THE TOP

Barbro Ehnбом has successfully promoted women in their careers, not least within life sciences, and she is herself a living example of the changes she has pushed for.

TEXT MALIN OTMANI PHOTO JENNY ÖHMAN

“Early on I took care of myself. I founded my own companies and made my own money. For every goal I achieved my self-confidence grew.”



BUSINESS WOMAN **BARBRO EHNBOM** has become renowned for her valuable networks and her successful business-generating activities, for example through the female network *Barbro's Best & Brightest, the Female Economist of the Year* award and within life sciences she is perhaps best known as the founder of SALSS, *the Swedish-American Life Science Summit*. Over the years she has answered many questions about networking and how to build a successful career. Her own career however was more of a coincidence than a strategic plan she says when we meet during one of the very first rainy autumn days at biotech company Vironova's office in Stockholm. She has been in town for a few weeks, not least because of the happy occasion of her son's wedding, and she chitchats a little with the others at the office before serving herself a cup of coffee. "But a fortunate coincidence," she adds when we sit down at a table in one of the modern conference rooms.

Barbro is smart and quick-witted, but she is also curious and she makes people feel relaxed and noticed. She likes to discuss US politics and who will win this year's Nobel Prize and during our interview she suggested at least ten different successful women I should speak to.





“My mother looked like a fragile butterfly but she was strong as a lion. She had an amazing spirit.”

It is harder to get her to speak about herself, but Barbro elaborates on her thoughts about her own career and adds that her choices have also been born from expectations from home and from herself to achieve an academic degree and also a strong sense and determination to make it on her own and earn her own money.

THE ACADEMIC WORLD

Barbro Ehnbon grew up in Stockholm as the youngest of five siblings. Her father was the head of the Swedish National Audit Office and was very involved in his legal career. The person who influenced her the most, however, was her mother, Astrid.

“My mother looked like a fragile butterfly but she was strong as a lion,” says Barbro with warmth in her voice. “She had an amazing spirit. She was working full time and took care of all of us kids, but she also staged musicals and was a director. When she became ill with rheumatism she studied and received a PhD about Russian icons. So I have definitely been inspired by my mother and I have grown up with a strong interest for the academic world. Education and culture have always been important.”

As a child Barbro dreamt about becoming a poet or a veterinarian. Her interest in nature and animals probably came from the summers she spent at a homestead in Södermanland, a province in the south-east of Sweden. There she had the opportunity to take care of the animals, weed the turnip patch and wander around in the beautiful enchanted forests.

“But I was advised not to become a veterinarian, partly because it would mean very high costs for a young woman at that time,” she says. “I was also interested in becoming a diplomat but my sister *Karin* beat me to it. So my choice became the Stockholm School of Economics, and I am very happy about that.”

DAY & NIGHT

In her program on the Swedish radio show “Sommar i P1” two years ago Barbro described how she, dressed in black and white from head to toe (even her nails were black and white), with a 1960’s cap on her head and high boots, entered the prestigious Stockholm School of Economics. Almost immediately she was told that “the secretary course is in the evenings, sweetie.” At that time only ten percent at the school were women, but Barbro was not discouraged and she lived by the motto “good girl during the days and party princess during the nights.” She was a top student and at the same time very committed to the school’s students’ union where she arranged notorious parties. During our interview Barbro emphasized several times how much the Stockholm School of Economics has meant to her through the years and how the friends she met there are still important to her.

One year later she was working as a law teacher at the same school and had, together with some friends, started a company that arranged board dinners “perhaps Sweden’s first party planning company” and the perfect way for a young student to meet valuable contacts. “Early on I took care of myself. I founded my own companies and made my own money. For every goal I achieved my self-confidence grew,” she says.



NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Despite a lot going on in Stockholm, Barbro had a strong dream to go to America, something that had been reinforced during her economics studies. When she was 23 years old she received a scholarship and an opportunity to spend three months in New York. She went on sabbatical from her PhD studies at the Institute for Research but when she arrived *over there* it was love at first sight. When she got a job offer as a product manager, one of the first females in a position like that, at the pharmaceutical company Richardson Vick (today Procter & Gamble), it became clear that she was there to stay. “It was, again, serendipity that I started working in the pharmaceutical industry,” says Barbro. “But it is also something I am very happy about.”

A few years later a job offer, from an even more male-dominated industry, came along. She started working as one of the first female executive analysts on Wall Street.

“I stood out with my red hair and my Swedish accent, but I was ambitious and persistent,” describes Barbro.

But she also experienced her share of the inequalities in the US. One time her boss took her out to see an adult movie during lunch and when she got nominated as one of the top three best financial analysts in America by the magazine *Institutional Investor* they wanted her to pose in a bikini on the cover. “Swedish girls had a certain reputation during the 70’s,” Barbro says. “It is different today. When Americans hear Sweden now they think about quality, Volvo, tech, and beautiful girls still, but also honesty and perhaps a little bit boring.”

Just like in Stockholm, Barbro worked hard during the daytime and partied during the evenings. She was a regular at Studio 54, made valuable contacts at Club 21, and she spent time with celebrities in what she describes as, “A mix of great people in a time period that in a way felt more safe than today – no AIDS and no terror attacks.” Being a Swedish girl also opened many doors. Barbro arranged renowned parties and *Andy Warhol* dropped by, but also emancipists such as *Gloria Steinem* and *Betty Friedan*, whose commitment to the right to free abortion Barbro shared.

Even today, US politics engages her, and especially gun control, she says. “It is incredible what kind of power the NRA [the National Rifle Association] has. In other countries, like New Zealand, laws can be changed quickly, but not here,” she says despondently. Barbro is a Democrat and supports for example the US Congress woman *Diana DeGette*, who has dedicated her career to for example protect the environment and expand access to healthcare.

WORKING MOM

Barbro also founded a company in New York during the 1980's – again, one of the first females' in such a role. With her cosmetics company Swedish Secret, appointed Best Newcomer, she worked hard and a lot, so much so that only three days after her son was born she was back in the office. "He had a nanny and he was well taken care of. It was harder for me," she says. "But I was lucky; I had my own company and could bring both my son and my dog to the office."

Women should think carefully about where they want to be working the day they have kids, she advises. "At a large company you will have a lot more security but in a smaller company maybe it is more ok to work from home."



Having a career in New York meant always acting professionally and in Sweden it is hard to understand the business culture there, she says. "You can't just work a 40 hour week. In New York there are no safety nets and most people use a majority of their salaries to cover their living accommodation. A lot of people are only 2–3 months away from being homeless."

She describes for example how she lost almost everything she had in a fire, but nevertheless she went to work the day after – in borrowed clothes. Another time during a business meeting high up in a skyscraper the fire alarm went off but nobody moved, they just continued their discussions.

But being professional and dutiful has also been an important aspect in her success, Barbro believes. "If I set a goal I reach it, and I felt that way even when I was young."

WITH DIVERSITY COMES INNOVATION

Despite her own journey Barbro thinks that in order for women today to reach top positions a greater flexibility is needed at workplaces. "Sweden is at the top when it comes to equality between men and women, but unfortunately it is still not ok or financially possible to hire help with childcare or household duties. Foremost we need to create an environment adapted to female executives that will work long-term."

Barbro adds that efforts should also be put into changing the workplace culture, companies need to step up their game and involve and include women, and frankly 'men need to grow up'. *Barbro Dahlman Hall's* books on the subject of leadership with a gender perspective were an eye opener, she says.

When it comes to affirmative action in favor of women (a quota policy) Barbro has changed her opinion. Previously she was against it but today she is for it, but thinks that it should be called something else, something more positive.

"It is needed and it does not have to be such a big deal. Affirmative actions in favor of women have proven not only to increase the number of women but also the skill level in board rooms. An increasing diversity is a positive spiral, people are becoming more comfortable with each other's differences, comfortable with change, and are daring to choose partners on the basis of competence and suitability for the job. With diversity comes innovation."



“I have always felt like I compete with the men and I stand up for the women.”

For the same reasons as she believes women and men and different ethnicity adds value to companies, she also believes different ages do too. “Instead of pensioner it should be called senior advisor. The older generations have so much experience and knowledge to share. Start by speaking to your mother-in-law, your uncle or your grandfather.”

MENTOR AND PROMOTOR

Barbro has been a pioneer and the first woman in so many positions; as a student at the Stockholm School of Economics, as executive leader in the pharma industry, as executive analyst on Wall Street, as entrepreneur *and* as the only woman among 69 men in the Swedish-American Chamber of Commerce in New York. Throughout her whole career she has been a woman in surroundings dominated by men. Barbro has also come to work more actively and strategically to promote and help other women in their careers. A concrete action was the foundation of the Female Economist of the Year (FEOY) award. She wanted to give back to her former school and since 2001 the award has promoted future female leaders in the financial world. “During my years working in M&A [mergers and acquisitions] I never met any women in leadership positions, and I wanted to change that,” says Barbro.







The winner, a female student from the school, receives a scholarship and Barbro herself is mentor and promotor. *Susanna Francke Rodau*, today Head of Healthcare Development at Roche Diagnostics Scandinavia, received the 2005 award, including a tailor-made trainee program at Pfizer. “Besides the fact that it was a great honor, it was also FEOY who opened the door into the life science industry for me, where I have had a challenging and rewarding career for the past 14 years. In addition the scholarship gave me an extensive network of both other scholarship holders and other people connected to the Stockholm School of Economics, Barbro Ehnbon and the scholarship, which still gives me great joy and benefit,” Susanna Francke Rodau says.

For those who don’t get this type of opportunity, Barbro advises women and men aiming for a leadership role to target the traditional male-dominated work environments, not the HR department. She also advises creating a strong network and maybe a mentor who believes in you and can help promote you. “Become committed to something outside your work environment, perhaps a charity or something cultural. It also enriches your life. Seek out new networks by yourself, not together with your closest friends; this will broaden your network,” she says.

Barbro herself has been very involved in cultural activities and exchange between Sweden and the US. She has for example been Director of the Northern Lights Theatre and she is a member of the board at the Jussi Björling Society and the Taube Society.

MAKE SOMEONE HAPPY

In 2001 Barbro founded the female professional network Barbro’s Best & Brightest (BBB), which today has over 200 members, predominantly from Sweden and New York. The members have experience in everything from finance and medicine to diplomacy and stage performance. The network also has many partners who can act as mentors and promote the member’s careers. “The network has led to over 100 new jobs I would estimate,” says Barbro proudly. She describes BBB as her passion in life and quotes her favorite poet *Oscar Wilde* about it, “Put your talent into your work, but your genius into your life.”

“It might sound pretentious but it gives me so much energy to be able to help others and make someone happy. The contacts and the collaborations at BBB are my greatest inspiration and joy. Our meetings also spur new business ideas, which I love, and through my contacts I can help my members find financing partners,” says Barbro.

Sana Alajmovic went to the Stockholm School of Economics, just like Barbro, and when she was 23 she got a scholarship to go to New York, just like Barbro. She worked at the Swedish-American Chamber of Commerce and at a party she met Barbro, who attracted her to the life science industry. “She was my mentor and we soon became good friends. I joined BBB as Project manager for SALSS in 2012,”

says Sana, who today is CEO and co-founder of the biotech company Sigrid Therapeutics.

“Through BBB I have made friends for life and gotten the opportunity to meet both men and women within the Swedish business sector who have been both inspiring and helpful to my career. Barbro is incredibly generous with her contacts and very skilled in matching together people who may benefit from one another.”

Because of the circumstances of being one of the few women in those early years, Barbro herself did not have any professional female network supporting her in her career. “Although I didn’t have the benefit of any female sounding board, I got very involved with everything Swedish in New York, including several Swedish women associations. I am also lucky to have super role models in my sisters.”

The closest to a mentor she has had was *Dr. Hans Werthén*, former Chairman and CEO of Electrolux, who acquired over 500 companies. “He pushed me in my career, for example he told me “apply for a job within M&A” so I did what he said,” says Barbro and laughs.

A VERY UNIQUE CONFERENCE

The idea behind the Swedish-American Life Science Summit (SALSS) was born in 2000/2001, when Barbro assisted Swedish Consul General Olle Wästberg in arranging meetings at the popular 600 Park Avenue in New York. The concept was that Barbro would invite investors and the owners of investment companies to meet new hot Swedish biotech companies. She initiated the first SALSS meeting in Stockholm 2005 and down the years the event has highlighted important progress and challenges within the life science industry. On the agenda are the most interesting topics and the most exciting people. This is mixed with Barbro’s sense of creating relaxing settings where conversations can grow and new contacts can be made. Everybody I have spoken to for this article repeated the same words, “SALSS is a very unique event.”

“It is the only meeting that has succeeded in attracting people from the top of the US life science industry – scientists, companies and investors – to Sweden,” says *Nikolaj Sørensen*, CEO of Orexo. “There is no doubt that Barbro’s commitment and network in both the US and in Sweden is the key to this success. Without Barbro this meeting would probably have been like all other meetings in Sweden; mainly Swedish representatives and perhaps an occasional lone American.”

“In every encounter I have had with Barbro I am struck by her commitment, her professionalism and warmth. Thanks to her personality, her experience and broad network SALSS has received the status and the extremely interesting content that it has,” agrees *Maria Strömme*, professor in Nanotechnology at Uppsala University.

INTERVIEW // BARBRO EHNBOM

“Through BBB I have made friends for life and gotten the opportunity to meet both men and women within the Swedish business sector who have been both inspiring and helpful to my career.”

SANA ALAJMOVIC, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER, SIGRID THERAPEUTICS

Q&A'S

BARBRO EHNBOM

INTERESTS?

Art, music, dance and theatre. I also like being alone, I love music but lately I have started to appreciate the silence. I want to spend more time in forests, you find everything there; life, tragedy, romance, fragility.

THE BEST THINGS ABOUT SWEDEN?

Great food, wonderful weather four months a year and my family and many friends live here. There is a living culture and a great history. Swedes are more cultural and well-read. There is honesty here.

THE BEST THINGS ABOUT NEW YORK?

A creative environment, I have loved New York from the very first moment, you feel special and there is an unwritten loyalty and solidarity. It is not discriminatory and there is an openness and kindness there that makes you feel good.

THE NEXT BIG THING IN LIFE SCIENCE?

AI, Medical Robotics and caring for your brain health.



“Although I didn’t have the benefit of any female sounding board, I got very involved with everything Swedish in New York, including several Swedish women associations. I am also lucky to have super role models in my sisters.”

Last year Barbro also decided to arrange a SALSS meeting in Washington D.C., together with the Swedish Embassy there, and a second meeting was arranged there earlier this year. “When we got the opportunity to arrange SALSS at the amazing House of Sweden in Washington it felt like a great honor. In addition Washington D.C. is a very important city for all life science companies aiming to market themselves in the US,” says Barbro.




Helén Waxberg, Senior Advisor and Lawyer at Mannheimer Swartling participated in SALSS D.C. “The cross-fertilization that occurs is extremely exciting. In addition the SALSS meetings are a great source of energy and you always feel very positive and enthusiastic after Barbro’s events,” she says.

Li-Huei Tsai, Professor and Director at the Picower Institute for Learning and Memory, MIT, has also attended SALSS and says it was a wonderful experience and that Barbro’s passion is contagious and that she sees her as a role model.

“Sweden is a power house when it comes to life science research and industry. SALSS provides a much needed forum for the two sides to get to know the latest and the most exciting development in life science industry. This creates opportunities for collaboration and joint venture,” she says.

Next year, 2020, SALSS in Stockholm will be something extra special, reveals Barbro. The two themes will be *Gene and Cell Therapy* and *Sustainability*.

Mohammed Homman, CEO at Vironova and a SALSS Senior Advisor, sits down with me and Barbro and explains a little bit more about the topics. He is certain that gene and cell therapy will revolutionize several diseases in the future, not only cancer, which is where we have currently seen the most progress. In order to reach the full potential of this therapy, however, it is essential that the legal framework follows the development and does not slow it down, and also that the costs decrease.

BARBRO’S COMMITMENT, DRIVE and ability to move mountains cannot escape anyone’s attention. When she reveals a personal tragedy during our interview, a recent operation to remove a tumor, her inner strength and fighting spirit shines even brighter. She does not want anyone to feel sorry for her, it should be she who helps and cheers up others. Down the decades this has been the women she helps. “I have always felt like I compete with the men and I stand up for the women.” But now Barbro has started to think and just before we say goodbye she says that it might be time to also do something for the men as she concludes, “Men also have a tough time.” 



FACTS

BARBRO EHNBOM

Born: 1945 in Stockholm

Family: Her son Marcus and his family, including 2 grandchildren, dachshund Lalla, siblings

Lives: New York and Stockholm

Education: The Stockholm School of Economics (1967), PhD studies at the Institute for Research and Columbia University, Research Assistant to Professor Assar Lindbeck

Career: Marketing Manager at Richardson-Vick Corp, Product Manager at American Home Products, Vice Chairman and Financial Analyst at Delafield Childs Corp, Securities Analyst LF Rothschild, Director Corporate Development at Smith Kline Corp, Partner at Argosy Capital, Founder, Chairman and CEO at Swedish Secret, Chairman at DuHaan Groupe, Founder and Head of BBB, Founder and Chairman of SALSS

Board commitments: Northern Lights Theater, Scandinavian Chamber Orchestra, Jussi Björling Society, Taube Sällskapet, Lärargalan, BB Educational Trust, Avra Medical Robotics, DuHaan Groupe, Sophia Hemmet, SACC NY/Gateway, Vironova, TalentUp, DemeRx

Awards: Life Science Profile of the Year from the Swedish Pharmaceuticals Magazine, Role model of the Year from Klara K, HHS Centenary medal from the Stockholm School of Economics