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Mar 07, 2017

Theme: Women and power in the workplace



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The Nordic region not good enough on gender equality and mental health

There has been no overall change in the distribution of powerful positions in the Nordic region, according to the NLJ's gender equality barometer for 2017. Yet there is an increase in the number of women in top positions within trade unions, employers' organisations and labour government ministries.

EDITORIAL

06.03.2017

BY BERIT KVAM

Gender equality takes centre stage as we approach 8 March. At the Nordic Labour Journal the hour of reckoning is here as we count the number of women and men in positions of power.

Finland lags behind, but with the end of fraternity saunas and drinking parties, the road to diversity opens up. Power and how it is distributed is important. Power defines focus. When it is restricted to a narrow group, like the male saunas of Finland, the outlook becomes limited. The male sauna is gone and the all powerful male bastions of the Finnish trade union movement is history, our report shows.

The Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS) is also expanding its power base. The 16 member organisations are now represented by eight women and eight men, but this is not equally divided between the countries.

Why are things moving so slowly? It is interesting to look at experiences from Värmland.

Using humour and the campaign "Schyst", the county administration has got tools to work with and has made gender equality a theme.

"The aim is to make people understand that gender thinking is always there; in the way we communicate, place ourselves in a room, in how we relate to power and to each other. The result has been a long term change in attitudes."

Power is about being visible and listened to. People with mental problems are being excluded both from power and from the labour market.

This issue of the Nordic Labour Journal focuses on youths' health and exclusion from education and working life. One in five children and young people struggle psychologically and

the problems have increased in later years across the Nordic countries.

This formed the backdrop for debates at the Nordic summit in Oslo on 27 February, and at the conference on youths, health, education and work on 28 February. The focus was on cooperation across disciplines and sectors. Norway launched a three year Nordic research project to gather and spread experiences and knowledge between the countries. It is not enough to have knowledge and good plans if the execution is not good enough. That point was driven home by the OECD's Christopher Prinz during the summit:

"The Nordic countries are trailblazers in many ways. Mental issues are not taboo like in many other countries, and can be discussed more openly. You excel at shaping political programmes to address the problems, but you are much less successful in implementing them," Prinz said.

Women's participation in the labour market has put the Nordic countries top in international rankings. If children and youths are not better looked after, that advantage will not last for long.

According to the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, psychological ill health is a main cause of absence from upper secondary education, and an obstacle to higher education and labour market participation. It is also the main cause of disability among young people.

The spotlight is on. The Nordic region will work together to find measures that work. It then remains to make Prinz's words redundant. There must be no problems with the execution.

Nordic gender equality stagnating, yet there is an increase in female working life leaders

There was no overall change in the distribution for Nordic women in the past year. But the Nordic Labour Journal’s gender equality barometer shows that there has been a further polarisation between the countries. On 8 March each year we look at 24 different powerful jobs to see whether they are filled by a man or a woman. 200 points are distributed, and 100 points to women means full equality. This year they got 64.

THEME

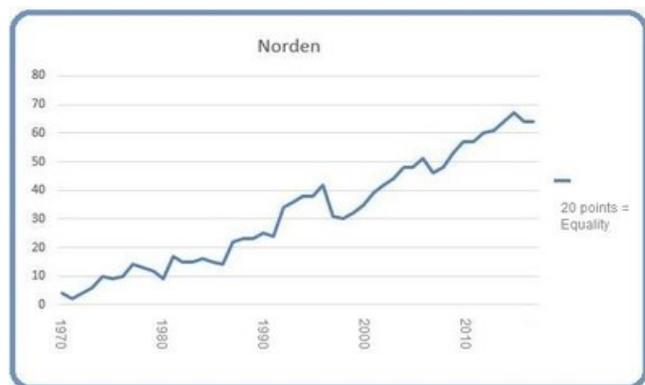
06.03.2017

TEXT AND GRAPHS: BJÖRN LINDAHL

That is the same sum as for 8 March 2016. The highest number, 67 points, came on 8 March 2015. Things have been changing in both directions in the different countries, and this has led to a polarisation.

Norway strengthened its position as the most gender equal out of the Nordic countries when you look at 13 government ministers, five positions of power among the social partners and five symbolically important positions (see the fact box for how the points are measured).

The Nordic Region



This year Norway gains another two points because Kari Sollien became the President of the Federation of Norwegian Professional Associations. As a result, the country gets 24 points. 20 points means full gender equality in each country.

Finland remains bottom with only four points. In Sweden and Iceland women loose one point but in Denmark they win one. That leave the Nordic share of points looking like this:

Country	Change	Points
Denmark	+1	12
Finland	-	4
Iceland	+1	9
Norway	+2	24
Sweden	-1	15
Nordic region	+1	64

Despite what might look like stagnation, there have been some victories for women. For the first time ever there is a female minister of fisheries in Iceland, a country where that government post is considered to be one of the most important.

The clearest tendency, however, is that labour market issues are about to be controlled by the women. The clearest example of this is Norway, where both the President of the Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) and the Director General of the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise are women.

The service union and the two unions for professionals are also led by women. A woman is also leading the Employers’ Association Spekter, counting 200,000 members in private and public companies.

Finally, the Minister of Labour is also a woman, Anniken Hauglie.

The development has taken time. It is now 16 years since Wanja-Lundby Wedin became the first female leader of the

Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO, since it was founded 102 years ago. Six months later she was followed by Gerd-Liv Valla in Norway. It then took until 2015 before Lizette Risgaard was elected President of LO-Denmark. There is also change afoot in Finland, as our reporter there reports (Out with the trade union sauna – in with gender equality!)

In Iceland Ólafía B. Rafnsdóttir became the first female President in 122 years of Iceland’s trade union for commercial workers, VR in 2013. One year later she became the first deputy leader of ASÍ, the equivalent of LO in the Scandinavian countries.

There are also female leaders on the employers’ side now. Carola Lemne is Director General at The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, and that country’s Minister for Employment is Ylva Johansson. Kristin Skogen Lund has been Director General for the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO) for five years.

If you widen the selection to look at all of the 16 Nordic trade unions and the three autonomous areas that make up the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS), eight of them are led by women and eight by men (see fact box). Altogether the unions have nine million members.

In the past year Denmark got a new government when Lars Løkke Rasmussen formed his third on 28 November 2016. There was also a new government in Iceland on 11 January this year, after ten weeks of long negotiations.

It is not an easy task to compare positions of power within different government ministry posts. The number of ministers varies between different governments. Sweden has the most with 24 ministers, Denmark has 22 and Norway 19. Then there is a big leap down to Finland, where there are only 14 ministers. The New Icelandic government has 11 ministers, compared to nine in the previous government.

Political power also comes from experience.

“Lavrov is a political fox, very experienced and so am I, actually,” Sweden’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström, said recently after meeting her Russian colleague, Sergej Lavrov, for the first time since the EU imposed sanctions on Russia.

She has also become known for introducing a feminist foreign policy.

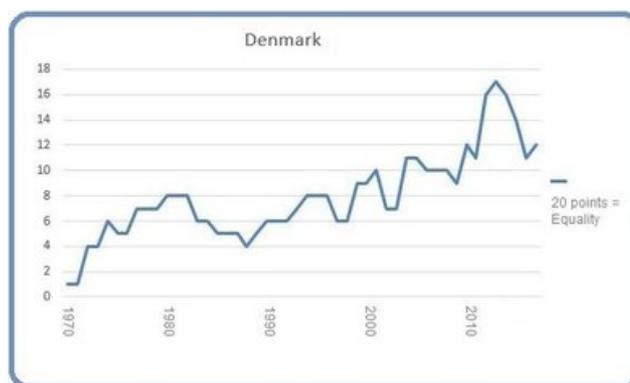
Over the period we have looked at the division of power in the Nordic region, 1970 to 2017, this has happened:

- Sweden has had eight prime ministers leading 13 governments
- Denmark has had nine prime minister leading 24 governments
- Norway has had 11 prime minister leading 16 governments

- Finland has had 16 prime minister leading 24 governments
- Iceland has had 15 prime minister leading 16 governments

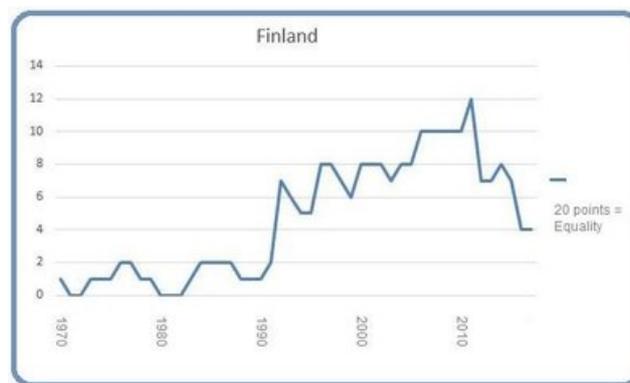
When our barometer shows Finland with only four points while Norway has 24 points, it should not be interpreted as saying Norway is six times more gender equal than Finland. But it allows us to reflect over how gender issues are being dealt with in a government where all of the heavy ministerial posts are being held by men, or where the gender balance is the opposite.

Denmark



The fact that the new Danish Minister for Culture is a woman, Mette Bock, means one more government ministry is run by a woman compared to Lars Løkke Rasmussen’s last government. Nine out of the 22 government ministers are women, which means Denmark has reached what has become a minimum standard in the Nordics – having at least 40 percent women ministers. But the fact that they only get three points in the gender equality barometer shows that they do not have any heavy positions of power.

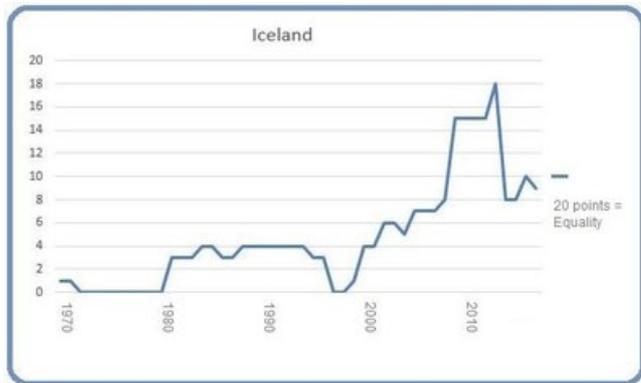
Finland



Finland takes bottom place again this year. There are few ministers in the Finnish government, only 14. We give Sanni Grahn-Lassonen two points since she is both Minister of Education and Culture. Five of the 14 ministers are women, which means there is only 35.7 percent women in the gov-

ernment. There are still no women in leadership positions at any of the trade unions or employers' unions. After Pauliine Koskelo left her job as President of the Supreme Court of Finland there is also no woman to be found in the symbolically important posts.

Iceland

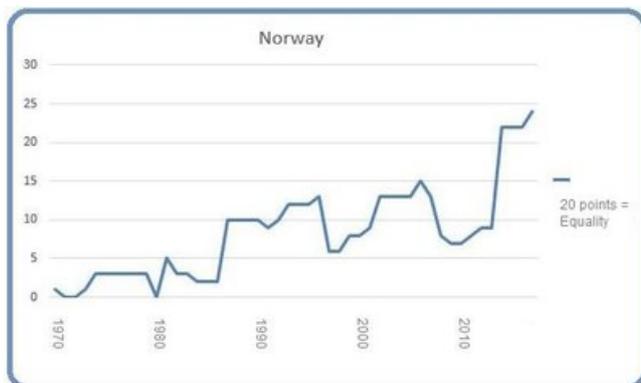


In Iceland the number of government ministers increased from 10 to 11. Four out of them are women, which is 36 per cent.

Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir is Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture. This is the first time in Icelandic history a woman has been responsible for fisheries and agriculture policies.

Thordís Kolbrún R. Gylfadóttir also beats a record. The 29 year old is the youngest female minister ever in Iceland. She will have the responsibility for tourism, innovation and industry. Over the past two years she has been a deputy for Ólöf Nordal. Prime Minister Bjarni Benediktsson had reserved a seat for Ólöf Nordal in his government, but she died from cancer on 8 February.

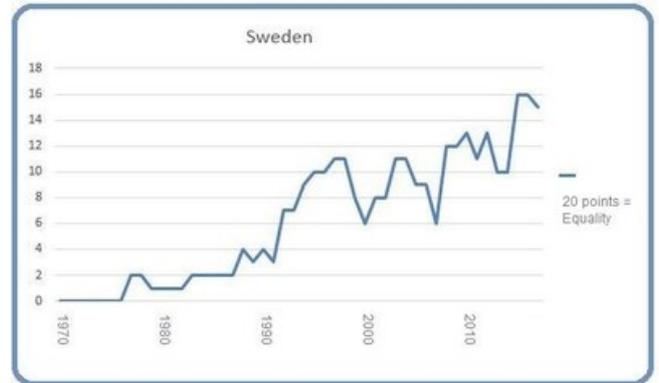
Norway



The only change is that Kari Sollien became the President of The Federation of Norwegian Professional Associations (Akademikerne) on 28 October 2016. Even if we counted the other major trade union for professionals, Unit, the result

would have been the same. It has been led by Ranghild Lied since 2016, who is also President of the NFS this year.

Sweden



There have been few changes in Sweden. The government has only seen a reshuffle, which does not influence our barometer.

On 1 May 2016 Marianne Lundius left after six years as Chairwoman of the Supreme Court of Sweden. She was followed by Stefan Lindskog, so Sweden loses one point here.



Out with the trade union sauna – in with gender equality!

Gender equality in Finnish trade unions might have been lagging behind other Nordic countries. But things are getting better. “The time for male sauna and drinking parties is over. Finnish trade unions are opening up for women, also at the top level. There are still structures which lead to male dominance in Finnish politics and working life,” say gender equality experts Marianne Laxén and Päivi Niemi-Laine, President for the JHL trade union. But it should not be necessary to act like a man in order to get a top position.

THEME

06.03.2017

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING, PHOTO: CATA PORTIN

Marianne Laxén is still a trailblazer in Finnish gender equality politics. We meet her on a snowy evening in central Helsinki at the Luckan cultural centre. She is there to address a meeting of the Finland-Swedish friends of peace. Around

ten women want to listen to Marianne Laxén talk about the evening’s theme, feminist peace work.

Cold sauna, empty bottle

We sit that meeting out in order to get a quick résumé of Finnish gender equality in working life then and now. It starts with a surprise: There is no more male dominance.

“Before, the boys sat in the sauna debating. Alcohol also played an important role in the decision making,” Marianne Laxén reminds us.

But that culture is gone. The consumption of strong alcohol within trade unions has fallen considerably since the 1980s. This also makes it easier for women to take part; there is a more open culture. Decisions are made more out in the open.

There are other issues which, according to Marianne Laxén, make women shy away from top jobs in the trade unions. One might be the long training process which might feel a bit old fashioned because it demands so much time away from home and family. Men seem more prepared to sacrifice the family for the trade union.

Trade union bankruptcy scaring women away?

The three central Finnish trade unions – SAK, Akava and STTK – are all led by men and always have been.

There was a fourth one which was led by a woman. But the confederation of salaried employees TCO went bust during the 1990s casino economics in Finland.

Marianne Laxén considers the bankruptcy as one of the reasons why no woman has wanted to apply for the top positions since. The women had to take responsibility and tidy up the mess caused by the men, it was said afterwards. Nobody wants that to happen again.

There is progress

Marianne Laxén has been a leading gender equality civil servant both in the Finnish and Swedish government offices, as well as with the Nordic Council of Ministers' secretariat in Copenhagen.

She does see progress in Finland. But the situation centrally is not yet ideal.

Men and women in central organisations, 2015

Org.	Board	♀	%
Akava	21	4	19 %
SAK	20	6	30 %
STTK	27	9	33 %
EK	19	4	21 %

The grid shows the difference in female and male boardroom representation in the three central trade unions and in the Confederation of Finnish Industries, EK.

What surprises Marianne Laxén the most is that the Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland, Akava, with their well-educated members, has not reached more than a measly 19 percent female representation.

The Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK in Finnish) is the largest, but not the best on gender equality. Female members are just shy of making up a majority.

The Finnish Confederation of Professionals (STTK in Finnish) took over the women hit by the bankruptcy and is now the largest for female representation and has the most women in leading positions.

On the employers' side, female boardroom representation stands at 21 percent, but in the executive committee it is zero.

Where femininity shines

At the modern offices of JHL, the Trade Union for the Public and Welfare Sectors, the leadership is gathering. Päivi Niemi-Laine is a modern leader, letting her feminine side show both through how she dresses and behaves, she says.



She is happy to tell us about her first important negotiations with the employer, when she rolled up in a miniskirt and high heels and was met with suspicion, as women so often experience. But if you know what you're talking about, clothes don't matter she says.

As late as in 2001 it was not uncommon for male trade union bosses to patronise her and women in general. Women were complimented on their hair colour, but nobody wanted serious negotiations with them, and certain jobs were considered to be reserved for men.

But no longer. Päivi Niemi-Laine sees no oppression of women trade union leaders. But the female trades suffer.

Largest membership among female trades

The Social Democrat Päivi Niemi Laine became President of JHL a couple of years ago, replacing Jarkko Eloranta who became the SAK Chairman. A woman held the post before him, so here a female leader is nothing new.

Päivi Niemi-Laine is one of four women in the SAK leadership. Her union has more than 225,000 members, 70 per cent of them are women. The Service Union United, PAM, is slightly larger, and is also led by a woman.

The largest trade unions have many things in common: A large majority of women members and in boardrooms. They often represent the cleaning, care, service and education sectors. Low salary trades exposed to a lot of competition, points out Päivi Niemi-Laine.

Care sector reform threatens women

The largest problem facing public sector trade unions is a care sector reform which Finland will introduce in a few years from now. Responsibility for the care and social sectors will move from the municipalities to a new regional structure.

More than 200,000 employees will get new employers. People worry about of pay cuts, short term jobs, demands for flexibility and zero hours contracts, as their jobs are being unbundled and new care companies enter into the fray to secure a freedom of choice for clients.

Female leadership – different?

Many want more female leaders. But why? Just to balance the numbers, or because they are better leaders? There are at least differences in terms of which issues are being raised and in the type of leadership, thinks both Marianne Laxén and Päivi Niemi-Laine.



Wage politics seem to be male trade union bosses area of speciality, while female trade union leaders might talk more about family politics. From time to time they have also been able to win concessions to bridge the gender pay gap. But that was a long time ago.

“Otherwise it is a question of personality rather than gender. Female and male trade union bosses have been through pretty much the same education and selection processes,” underlines Marianne Laxén. Their policies are fairly similar, shaped together.

Tarja Halonen a role model

Päivi Niemi-Laine talks about emotional leadership, the empathy which allegedly is more prevalent among women. Men lead on issues, they focus on achieving results, but have less empathy and feelings (which is also perceived to be the typical Finnish leadership style).

In many ways Tarja Halonen is a role model who reached the republic's top position, the presidency, after having served both as foreign minister and an MP. She showed that female leadership also could introduce soft values, human rights.

Marianne Laxén agrees. If you can reach a balance in gender representation in politics, both on a municipal and national level, why should it be so difficult in the trade unions?

Female flexibility and insecure jobs

The new care sector reform puts the public sector with many women employees in a difficult position, points out Päivi Niemi-Laine. Many jobs are under threat, they need understanding employers who can emphasise with other people's

emotions. The decisions made might be the same regardless of the boss' gender. But the goals will be achieved in a softer way with female bosses, she believes

The government cuts amount to three billion euro. This has drawn a lot of criticism from the trade unions.

“When the cuts have all been carried out within the service and care sectors, male trades will be hit too,” warns Päivi Niemi-Laine. She is hoping for male solidarity now. Men might need female solidarity later on.

”Different during Lipponen”

Both Marianne Laxén and Päivi Niemi-Laine know that there are far more women trade unions leaders in the other Nordic countries. Perhaps that is why everyday problems get less attention in Finland. And the economy, for instance equal pay, gets a lot more attention in Norway, for instance.

That has been a nearly dormant issue for a long time in Finland. It is not part of the latest Finnish government programme. Under Social Democrat prime ministers like Paavo Lipponen, equal pay was an issue. Now people have become used to the pay gap.

The gap has grown particular for the younger generation. For every euro a man earns, women get 83 cents. Or: For each euro a woman earns, men take home €1.20.

Wage gap to the grave

The wage gap matters for the duration of people's lives, the inequality is evident also in the pensions people draw. Marianne Laxén knows, as she is a member of one of Finland's large pension unions.

Finnish women's shorter careers have an impact on their pension. They are almost dependent on their husband's pension. Yet Finland does not face the same problem as Sweden, where many women work part time and take a cut to their pension as a result.

Cutting men's wages?

“You cannot see everything in terms of cost efficiency, competition and unbundling. You have to remember that the public sector also supports the traditionally male trades, the export industry and economic growth.”

Both Päivi Niemi-Laine and Marianne Laxén agree.

Laxén is even willing to cut men's salaries if women's wages can not be increased. For real?

“Yes, all of our economic policy is based on increasing consumption. But I am not sure everybody becomes happy by consuming more. We should put the brakes on. But right now things are moving in the opposite direction, towards the right and more injustice,” says Marianne Laxén.

Gender equality benefits employers too

There is also a lack of women in employer's leadership positions, just like within the trade unions. But that might not matter. Päivi Niemi-Laine's opposite during municipal negotiations is the municipal employers' organisation, where she has been met with understanding for women's demands. It is a different story with the export industry and big industry.

Marianne Laxén says employers benefit from gender equality too, for instance when it comes to family policies. With the current system, women's employers pay a lot more parental benefits, because women are the ones claiming it.

But here change seems to be afoot. All organisations are now updating their family policies. There seems to be changes coming to parental leave rules.

Quotas in trade unions and companies?

Female boardroom quotas are often discussed in Finland. But it does not exist in companies nor in trade unions.

JHL's President is principally in favour of female boardroom quotas. It would set an example for all of society. We have seen an improvement, but we need a quota, at least until the imbalance has been addressed, says Päivi Niemi-Laine.

But in trade unions? Should there be quotas there? Marianne Laxén is doubtful.

“I have been pro quotas for companies, but I am not sure whether it has much effect. It is mainly a question of democracy.”

A quota would still change the unions. Without it it will take longer to achieve a balance, but Laxén believes it will even itself out anyway.

Female quotas are not a goal, but a tool to reach equality faster. The important thing is to not turn the women into men in order to be good at leadership and get chosen.

Perhaps we don't need more tough bosses, even if they are women, suggests Marianne Laxén.

Changing attitudes takes time

The Finnish government should of course promote gender equality. But the current centre-right government only states as a fact that Finnish men and women are equal. Päivi Niemi-Laine and Marianne Laxén, Social Democrats both, are critical to this.

It is evident both in the trade unions and in the private sector. Yet it is still difficult to get a woman to the top. Not because women do not want the top jobs. For some reason they have pulled back in the last minute.

The service sector union leader Ann Selin has left the race to get the job as chairperson at the SAK, with vague explanations about not wanting to create a split in the organisa-

tion. But while Päivi Niemi-Laine believes in gender equality in trade union leaderships, Marianne Laxén is more pessimistic.

The health sector union today has a male leader, despite the female dominated membership.

And it will probably be many years before The Finnish Metalworkers' Union gets a female leader, like what seems to be happening in Sweden right now, says Marianne Laxén.

The male drunken sauna sessions might be gone from Finnish trade union life. But the attitude that there are male and female jobs is harder to shake off. Both Marianne Laxén and Päivi Niemi-Laine put their hopes in the next generation of trade union members.



Humor is a tool for gender equality in Värmland

Region Värmland and the Värmland county administrative board use humour in a new campaign to get young people to learn more about gender equality. The aim is to get the young to make more equal choices than today, which is considered necessary in order to create growth and a good life.

THEME

06.03.2017

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN, PHOTO: KRISTOFER BRUNGEL

“You make nice graphs, yes you have put in a lot of work to find out what makes you the worst. That’s something: ‘you’re the worst for gender equality but good at statistics,’” jokes Ludde Samuelsson, one of the nationally famous standup comedians who is helping launch the campaign ‘Aha Värmland’.

The launch took place in the middle of February at one of Karlstad’s upper secondary schools. One of the standup comedians was there to soften the hard facts presented in the county statistics on gender equality, and two school classes were asked to identify which issues they felt were the most important in terms of gender equality. Equal rights, was the main message, but also equal pay and equal opportunities.

Using laughter, the people of Värmland – and young people in particular – should realise that gender equality creates a better life and a better society. A ‘ha-ha’ is being turned into an ‘a-ha’. The campaign is run in cooperation with the county administrative board, and is one of seven projects in Sweden which has received funds from the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth.

“We want to present the statistics we have gathered in a new way, and tell the younger generation who are facing many choices – like what occupation to go for, whether to take parental leave and actually participating and gaining power,” says Marianne Nilsson, project leader for gender equal regional growth in Region Värmland.



Marianne Nilsson, project leader for Region Värmland and Katarina Jakobsson, gender equality expert with Värmland county administration

Bleak gender equality statistics

In 2006 the county administrative board began gathering gender equality statistics for Värmland. Since 2012 this has been done in cooperation with Region Värmland, which gathers the county’s six municipalities and the county council. The statistics show that the state of gender equality is pretty bleak, and that things have been more or less static in the past five years.

For instance, 9.3 percent of CEOs in Värmland companies are women, and only three out of the 16 municipalities have female mayors. 79 percent of senior politicians and officials are men and 21 percent are women. Many workplaces are either male or female dominated, which can be explained by the fact that Värmland’s main trades are steel and engineering industries and forestry, while women seek jobs in the health and care sector.

There are also big wage differences, and on average men earn 55,000 kronor (€8,800) more each year than women. More men than women are unemployed, but 51 percent of women of foreign heritage are outside of the labour market.

Looking forward, there is a risk that the gender gaps will prevail. In upper secondary schools, girls go for typically ‘female subjects’ like care and pre-school, while boys choose technology, construction and industry. And in Värmland, like in many other municipalities, the differences in education levels between young men and women is growing. In 2015 nearly 50 percent of women had a higher education, while 23 percent of men had the same. The total number of people who take higher education is also lower in Värmland than in the rest of the country.

“Värmland is below the national average for pretty much everything,” states Marianne Nilsson.

An attractive county for both women and men

Yet despite the sad statistics, there is a basic optimism at Region Värmland and a desire to change the status quo.

“There is a great desire for improving gender equality in the region right now. If we want to recruit and keep people, we have to be a county which is attractive to everybody. This is a matter of survival and a matter of growth,” says Marianne Nilsson.

The regional director Lars Christensen agrees.

“We have been talking about gender equality for a long time, but only now does it feel like we have reached a tipping point when things can really begin to happen,” he says.

His explanation is partly that they have been working for a long time to create awareness about what gender equality entails. 140 organisations are part of ‘A gender equal Värmland’ and a long-running project called ‘Schyst’ (‘Great’) has worked to introduce gender thinking right down to the smallest of meetings.

24,000 copies of a handbook has been sold and given out, and a copy has been ordered by 1,400 organisations. There have also been more than 100 talks and workshops. The aim is to make people understand that gender thinking is always there; in the way we communicate, place ourselves in a room, in how we relate to power and to each other. The determined effort has got attention, which in turn has increased belief in the work to promote gender equality.

“Through ‘Schyst’ we became more aware of how we can work. We have also become sought after, which has given us more self confidence. More and more people come to our conferences and more and more want our help. Gender equality has become an issue,” says Marianne Nilsson.

“The communication around ‘Schyst’ meant everything. There has been a long term change of attitudes through education and skills development,” says Lars Christensen.

No collective guilt

Another explanation for the growing interest in gender equality is a change of generations.

“Today you cannot hire a man or a woman to work in organisations with old structures and old attitudes to issues like parental leave or working hours,” says Lars Christensen, who took daddy leave himself.

Yet he, like Marianne Nilsson, is careful not to blame older men. Värmland does not want to point fingers and use blame in its work with gender equality.

“We should not be afraid to describe the situation, but we should avoid dishing out blame and rather provide keys and tools. I think this is the way you increase people’s interest,” says Marianne Nilsson.

Lars Christensen says there has been increased awareness, and that the goal is gender equal growth. Gender equality is taken into account when working with many of the region’s growth issues, and there is agreement on the highest regional level.

“This is not about looking better in statistics – this is really important for Värmland’s development”, said chairperson for the Värmland region Tomas Riste in the press release which accompanied the launch of the ‘A-ha’ campaign.

Young men must pull themselves together

Even though the county’s municipalities look very different – from the growth areas like Karlstad and Hammarö to the border commute municipality of Årjäng and the former industrial towns in Klarälvdalen, gender equality concerns everyone, says Lars Christensen. He has also noticed a growing interest in gender equality among companies.

“We talk and they do,” he sums up, but also wants to point out that it is the region’s duty to ‘talk’ and that the public sector is often as efficient as the private sector in ‘doing’. Looking at statistics for Värmland, he also wants to highlight that the business structure is male dominated and that changes to gender equality will take time.

“There is not one model for cities and one for the countryside. Gender equality issues are equally interesting in Torsby and in Karlstad. We need to address the basic structures, for instance education. Today, girls carry on studying while boys don’t. That in itself is a challenge – men must pull themselves together and young women must be given space. It is not wrong to stay where you were born, but it is important to increase the general level of education,” says Lars Christensen.

He does not doubt for a second the importance of gender equality for growth.

“Gender equal and diverse companies are more profitable and attractive. This is a known fact, so gender equality does have great importance for regional development,” he says.

And the work to improve gender equality continues. Money is being invested in research to develop knowledge and to break

new ground. It is also crucial to get men onboard, and not to turn gender equality into a women’s issue without getting men to see the benefits. This is happening through projects like one at Färjestad’s hockey team.

“We cannot deal exclusively with those who say yes to gender equality. No-one has sole ownership of this issue, and only when everybody is involved can we create a better society and a better life,” says Lars Christensen.

NIVA Education introduces online courses

NIVA Education has started offering online courses in various topics to do with working environments and safety. “The best thing about these courses is that I can go back and listen to a lecture again and again. You always notice something new,” says Ásta Snorradóttir, is a lecturer in occupational rehabilitation at the at the University of Iceland.

NEWS

06.03.2017

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The Nordic countries are among the richest in the world, with highly developed welfare systems. But they also have high levels of sick leave, which has created a need both for doing research and for educating people in order to address the problems.

It is often too expensive to organise a course, or else there are not enough people to make it worthwhile. This is where NIVA Education has carved out a role. The Nordic institution was founded in 1982 with the sole aim of providing training in working environment and safety issues.

Since its inception 30 years ago, the institution has coursed more than 10,500 people. The courses are usually held in some of the Nordic capitals over two to three days.

Ásta Snorradóttir has also taken other courses run by NIVA.

“It has always been very nice and the participants create their own fellowship.”

The online course she is currently taking is called Work Disability Prevention.

“I take this both to update my own knowledge and to see whether there is something I should recommend to my own students.”

Complements the first year’s course

A traditional WDP course allows participants to chose to follow the entire three year course or just parts of it. The online course supports and complements the first year’s course, which was held in Helsinki in June 2016, by providing a summary of it.

That allows those who attend that course to be prepared for course 2 in 2017 and course 3 in 2018. But the online course can also be a stand-alone introduction to WDP.

“There is a mix of Nordic and European lecturers. The longest lecture lasts for one and a half hours and is held by Patrick Loisel, one of the leading researchers in the field. The other lectures are shorter and more concentrated. There is also written material and you are given topics to work with, but there are no exams.”

It costs 165 euro and you get your own login for a course account.

“You can work at your own speed, and this is a good alternative to traditional courses. You also get all of the information gathered in one place, when you traditionally would have to look for it,” says Ásta Snorradóttir.

NIVA Education aims to have 300 people attending their courses each year.

How many do you think will take part online?

“We have not got a goal for the number of online participants, since this is a pilot project. NIVA’s traditional concept is built around detailed studies where those taking part can meet and create networks. We have not yet had time to map how much interest there is in the courses. We will evaluate the pilot project towards the end of 2017. After that we will decide whether to carry on,” says Katja Pekkarinen, who is the courses’ project leader.

Do online courses lead to any kind of diploma or course papers?

“There is no diploma or course papers if you take part in the online course, partly because this is part of a bigger whole, and partly because there is no exam. We will most likely develop the concept later on, and then we might introduce a diploma for an online course. This course is a summing up of and introduction to the traditional WDP (year 1) course, and therefore there is no diploma at the end of it.”

Is this mostly one-way communication, or is there space for discussions and a chance to ask lecturers questions?

“This particular online course is built around one-way communication. The online course is one part out of a total of three. If you participate in the traditional WDP 2 in June 2017,

you get the chance to meet the lecturers and initiate a dialogue. When we have evaluated the first pilot course, we might develop the online course in order to make it possible to interact with the lecturers,” says Katja Pekkarinen.

Lex Laval revised in Sweden – to what effect?

Swedish trade unions will again be able to take industrial action in order to get foreign companies to sign collective agreements for their posted workers. That is what the Swedish government proposes, arguing the limitations introduced through the so-called lex Laval go too far. In practice the difference might not be quite as dramatic as it might seem.

NEWS

01.03.2017

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG, EDITOR EU&ARBETS RÄTT

After the EU Court of Justice's judgement in the much talked-about Laval case, a provision was introduced in the Posting of Workers Act which meant it was no longer allowed to take industrial action in order to secure a collective agreement with a foreign company, if that company can show that their employees already receive the minimum provisions covered by the agreement.

The problem with this is that the unions have no way of taking action against an employer who has not entered into a collective agreement, if it should turn out that this employer actually provides provisions of a lesser quality.

The unions have therefore demanded to be given the right to take industrial action in order to force posted companies to sign agreements which confirm that they follow the minimum provisions of the collective agreement. Otherwise they can bluff without risking anything, and that is also happening, the trade unions say.

Confirmation agreement – or else strike action

This is what the government now wants to change. From 1 July it will become legal to force posting companies to sign such confirmation agreements, using industrial action as a last resort. This way, trade unions are given a document to show in a court of law if necessary.

The question is how big a difference this will make in real life. The majority of posted workers are employed in the construction industry, and their employers mostly sign Swedish collective agreement already. And these are the ordinary collective agreements, no 'posting agreements' with minimum conditions.

This is because the main contractor, most often a Swedish company, demands that all subcontractors must be bound by parts of the trade's collective agreement. As a result, the new opportunities which the government wants to introduce will hardly lead to a revolution, at least not immediately.

It is also not certain that the Parliament will pass the proposed change. Right now it looks like it might get the support from the Sweden Democrats, which hold the balance of power, but the party has changed its mind before and the other opposition parties are opposed to the motion. Some argue the change would be in breach of EU law, others say that foreign companies would be discouraged from providing their services in Sweden.

More than just lex Laval

But the government's proposal is not only about backing away from lex Laval, even if it is this retreat which gets the most attention in Sweden. The proposal also aims to implement the EU's so-called enforcement directive from 2014. That should have been done by June last year, and only a few days before the bill was presented the government got a rollocking from the European Commission because of the delay.

The directive aims to tighten the implementation of the original posting of workers directive, and prevent the rules being misused by cowboy companies. Improved administrative cooperation between the member states's authorities forms the basis for how this should happen. The posted workers' opportunities to defend their rights in the country they work in are also to be strengthened.

The government wants to do this by giving them the right, in a court of law, to claim the provisions which their employer has committed to provide, even if they are not members of a Swedish trade union.

This represents an exception from the ordinary Swedish labour market rule, which says you need to be a member of the trade union which signed the collective agreement if you want to invoke this right. Major employer organisations are against this proposal too. Yet there seems to be little controversy surrounding the parts of the proposal which deal with how to implement the enforcement directive.



Lack of positive expectations an obstacle when young people with psychological problems seek work

“I was furious over the way I was treated in school when I told the teachers that I was mentally ill. The entire school system reacted by completely removing any demands on me. Any expectations of me achieving anything at all, and succeeding with anything, completely disappeared,” says Adrian Lorentsson.

NEWS

01.03.2017

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

“OK, then you don’t need to do anything’ was the answer I got. It was an important reason why I got involved with mental health work,” he says.

Today Adrian Lorentsson is the head of communications for Mental Helse Ungdom (Mental Health Youth) in Norway. He attended the conference on young people and mental health

in Oslo on 27 – 28 February together with other youths from the Nordic countries. The conference was part of Norway's programme during its Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Adrian Lorentsson highlighted one of many sore points in the work with young people and mental health. Too often it is assumed that people with mental problems are too ill to want to work. Yet international studies show that even among those with severe mental issues, 65 percent want to be part of working life. Only 15 percent of the people in that group actually do work.

There has been a comprehensive change in recent years when it comes to ideas for how to get more people with mental problems into the labour market. A method called IPS has proven far more efficient than earlier methods. IPS stands for Individual Placement and Support, a method originating from the USA (see fact box).

The largest study so far of the effects of IPS has just concluded in Norway, where more than 400 people with mental health problems were divided into two randomly chosen groups. One were given IPS and the other traditional, albeit upgraded, treatment from NAV, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration.

“Our study shows that after 18 months, 37 percent of the IPS participants found work, compared to 27 percent in the control group,” says Silje Endresen Reme, a researcher with UNI Research Health, which carried out the study together with UNI Research Rokkan Centre.

The numbers are slightly below those found in 17 other different international studies, where on average 58 percent of IPS participants found work on the open labour market, compared to 21 percent of those who received traditional help.

“One explanation could be that the benefits in Norway are more generous than in other countries. Also we know that only people with severe mental health problems took part in the earlier studies,” says Silje Endresen Reme.

The researchers also calculated how much money the IPS participants needed to earn in order for the support given them to be profitable in social economical terms. These results were slightly less positive.

“The salary level was so high that it was not realistic to consider the measure as social economically sustainable while the evaluation lasted. The salary needed was halved, however, if you projected what will happen over five years, from 395,000 Norwegian kroner a year after two years, to 141,800 kroner in annual pay after five years.”

Although there were other positive health effects from IPS too, there is much to gain from attacking the problems at an earlier stage.

Mental health problems are often the main cause for youths being defined at NEET (not in employment, education or training).

“But if we want to prevent mental health problems, NEET is a pretty useless term,” says Iben Nørup, who spoke about the challenges of identifying psychological ill health.

She is a researcher at the Department of Sociology and Social Work at Aalborg University in Denmark.

“The education is often the final thing to go. If we are to identify these youths at an earlier stage, we must look at who are unhappy, those who are doing badly but who are still not mentally ill



Iben Nørup

The conference has just been listening to Christopher Prinz. He works with mental health at OECD's Employment Analysis and Policy Division, and said that the average age for those who start showing symptoms of developing mental illness is 14.

“For those with psychological diagnosis like autism, Asperger, depression and so on, there are ways of identifying this at an early stage. But for most people we are talking more blurry signals, they are a bit more stressed and sad than other people, showing depressive tendencies without being depressed in mental illness terms,” says Iben Nørup.

“The latest major youth study in Denmark shows 25 percent of youths belong to this group. The risk of ending up in the NEET group is markedly higher than the average.”

The dilemma is that if you want to attack the problem, you must introduce broad measures to cover very large groups of

youths, which means you also end up treating youths who are nothing more than unsatisfied, and who bounce back later.

“How do we reach them at an earlier stage without stigmatising them?” as Christopher Prinz said in his talk.

“The Nordic countries are frontrunners in many ways. Mental issues are not taboo like in many other countries, and can be discussed more openly. You excel at shaping political programmes to address the problems, but you are much less successful in implementing them. There are limitations here which make that difficult.

“Yet you do make our job at the OECD easier. We can take your programmes and sell them to other countries where they are easier to implement,” he joked.



Christopher Prinz, OECD

According to Christopher Prince there is a need for change in three areas when tackling mental health issues:

- A shift in when to intervene. Problems must be identified earlier to secure early intervention
- A shift in how to intervene. Measures must be coordinated and the public services must be coordinated at different levels
- A shift in who needs to intervene. The most important people are those on the frontline of social services. They are the ones who must take action



Can cafés of influence and democracy heroes make us feel better?

One in five children and young people are struggling mentally. And the problems have been on the increase in all of the Nordic countries in recent years. That is the backdrop for a Nordic summit on mental health in Oslo.

NEWS

01.03.2017

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

“The increase in mental health problems among young people is one of the greatest public health challenges in the Nordic countries,” said Norway’s Prime Minister Erna Solberg as she opened the summit.

The summit host, Norwegian Minister of Health Bent Høie, did not wish to separate mental and physical health too much.

“There is a stronger link than we think. We know that being active means a lot both for our mental and physical health.

If we cannot sleep, it affects both our psyche and physiology, and being able to spend time with other people means a lot for both body and soul.”



Norway's Minister of Health and Care Services, Bent Høie

“Being lonely is as damaging as smoking 12 cigarettes a day,” claimed Bent Høie.

At the same time he wants to keep the different age groups apart:

“Youths represent a separate age group. They are not older children, nor young adults, but an entirely separate age group,” he pointed out.

Herein lies the challenge for politicians who want to improve the mental health of a country. Creating a good life is dependent on so many things: family, school, leisure time and work. At the same time we have created a system which divides life into stages. Nursery, elementary school, secondary and upper secondary education and university – these are all institutions run by separate groups of people who just about have time to get to know a child or a youth before it is time for them to be hurried along in the system. And this is only the educational system.

A need for better cooperation

The Nordic summit's ambition is to catch those struggling with psychological issues at an earlier stage. To do that, there is a need for better cooperation between the education and health sectors as well as between the labour and welfare sectors.

“During its Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, Norway has initiated a three year long project. It will share experiences and knowledge between the Nordic countries, including the best ways for different administration levels and sectors to work together,” said Prime Minister Erna Solberg.

As always, the Nordic cooperation is about highlighting good projects and to learn from each other.

“But it would also be good if we could learn from each other's mistakes,” pointed out Jari Partanen, State Secretary at the Finnish Ministry of Family Affairs and Social Services.

He highlighted a number to illustrate the large differences when it comes to mental health:

“49 percent of all early retirements in Finland are due to psychological problems.

The need to be seen

A common thread running through the summit was the human need to be seen and to make oneself heard.



Four of the Nordic youths who participated at the conference: Rosa Maria Boasdotir, Iceland; Jenna Wahlstén, Finland; Gabriel Malmer, Sweden and Emilie Agergaard, Denmark.

Meanwhile, several of the participating youths pointed out that it is not enough that someone listens to what they have to say, if they are not also given the chance to influence decisions which affect themselves.

“Sometimes it seems like they think all it takes is to include a young person. But bad representation can be worse than no representation at all,” says Karoline Nylander from Norway.

Voting age 16?

If you really want to listen to what youths have to say, perhaps it would be a good idea lower the voting age to 16?

Minister of Health Bent Høie passes the question to Oliwer Karlsson, project leader for ALLA UNGA (‘All Youths’) in Lund municipality in Sweden.

“That is a good idea, but it is also important to look at why young people who do have the vote don't use it,” said Oliwer Karlsson.



He presented ALLA UNGA, one of several projects showcased that day. Its aim has been to increase the influence and participation also among young people with 'intellectual function variation'.

"This is a term we use because we don't want to support the view that people are either normal or abnormal," says Oliver Karlsson.

"All it is is that someone with an intellectual function variation has other tools in their toolbox than those who don't have this."

In Sweden there are special schools for pupils who for instance struggle to receive, process and pass on information.

Not everyone found the Youth parliament

Lund municipality's work with young people disclosed that these students were not represented in the Youth parliament organised by the municipality a couple of times each term, where youths could meet to discuss issues which were important to them, as well as meeting decision makers and other key people from the municipality.

Meanwhile, studies done by the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF) show youths with disabilities are more pessimistic about the future. 7.7 percent among the group with disabilities are very pessimistic compared to 1.7 percent among other youths. A full 20 percent felt they had too much leisure time (compared to 9.5 percent) and 34 percent felt they had no influence (compared to 25 percent of other youths).

There have been a range of different initiatives with fanciful names like Cafés of influence and Democracy heroes. The first one is a variation on the Youth parliament, but only for students in special schools. The background was that the target group clearly expressed that they wanted more to do with their leisure time, while their influence was limited. Teachers said their students enjoyed cafés, so the two activities were linked.

A lack of role models

Democracy heroes is addressing the fact that there is often a lack of role models for young people in special schools. The Democracy heroes are young adults who have attended special schools themselves. Their main task is to make themselves available at the Cafés of influence so that everyone who visits can feel welcome.

The three main activities at the cafés are to snack, attend workshops and graphic facilitation. The latter is a method where thoughts and ideas are written down to explain concepts. Since many among the target group have limited reading and writing skills, and some also struggle verbally, images become another way of communicating.

It is a method which was used during the entire summit to explain the debate on mental health, where Minister of Health Bent Høie dared to present a definition:

"Mental health is to master your own life."



Esther Buchmann drawing and writing about the conference

Camilla Stoltenberg: Nordics should cooperate to improve young people's mental health

The Nordic countries should get together and create ambitious goals to improve young people's psychological well-being, argues Camilla Stoltenberg, professor and Director-General of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health.

NEWS

28.02.2017

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER

Should the Nordic countries worry about young people's poor mental health?

Yes, I think we should. Psychological ill health makes up a large part of young people's disease burden. It leads to suffering for the individual and their close ones – and this can be a loss for society. At worst it is also a cause of death, as a result of suicide, drug abuse and injuries.

Are you worried yourself?

Yes, especially when I think about the consequences this can have over a person's lifetime.

Do you see young people's psychological problems as a threat to their chances of getting an education and to their future in the labour market?

Yes, we know that psychological problems represent a major cause of absence from upper secondary education, and a weakened chance of getting a higher education and joining the labour market. It is also the main cause of disability among young people.

What particular psychological issues are young people facing?

Anxiety and depression are the most common problems for both young women and men, but more young women are treated for depression. ADHD, autism and other developmental problems most often appear earlier on in childhood, and boys get these diagnosis more often than girls. Schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, drug abuse and eating disorders are most often first seen in younger people. Even though these conditions are less common than anxiety and depression, they might be more serious and last longer.

It has always been a psychological challenge to be young and facing adult life – is being young today more taxing for people's psyche than it was before?

I don't think anyone knows the answer to that question. Personally I doubt that it was easier before, rather the opposite, but today more people ask for help, get a diagnosis and treatment – both successful, neutral and failed treatment. We also see changes which can help improve mental health in the Nordic countries. Fewer young people say they use tobacco, alcohol and other drugs. This is a good thing which can be decisive for their lives, not least in the long run.

What is the most important thing for safeguarding young people's mental health?

A good society is crucial, but we do not know enough about what element in that society is the most important one. We have reason to believe in certain things like: An environment where there is room for people to be different, which can be inclusive and supportive during difficult periods, and an environment where people can develop their skills and feel in control. But we need to create a better knowledge base, find out more about causes, about treatment and not least acquire more specific knowledge about how to prevent outbreaks of symptoms and illness, how we establish and execute good, preventative measures, and how we reduce the negative consequences of psychological symptoms and problems. There is a lot to be done here.

Should young people themselves change their habits and their self-image, or is it the responsibility of parents, schools or the Nordic societies to prevent mental problems among young people?

People of all ages want a good life. I don't think this is about pulling yourself together. Young people themselves must contribute, but first and foremost as a group. The main re-

sponsibility rests with society, and if the Nordic countries can work together that's great.

The problem has been known for quite some time, yet still it has not become smaller. Could more have been done?

We could have done more by getting more and better knowledge sooner. It is natural to think of the educational system as an arena in which you promote children and young people's mental health. In what way do nurseries and schools influence mental health? How can we adapt education to keep pupils in even if they develop a mental problem? We need to be more creative when applying measures and we need a more systematic approach to what we try out. There is knowledge around measures in schools like anti-bullying programmes, preventative and health promoting measures, but these must be developed further and be given a greater focus.

Do you see a potential for Nordic cooperation here?

Yes, absolutely. I want to highlight how we, across the Nordics, can use knowledge to create ambitious goals for improved mental health for children and young people. We can use our registry and public health studies – like the Norwegian and Danish birth cohorts – to study this and maintain an overview over developmental traits. There is already much good cooperation, including studies on the effects and side effects of ADHD medication and anti depressants. We should also develop better systems for the exchange of knowledge about what works. All this is well suited for cooperation between the Nordic countries.

Falling life satisfaction among Nordic youths

Life satisfaction is falling among Nordic youths, and at least one in four experience several symptoms of unhappiness, like headaches and stomach-aches. But there are large differences between the individual Nordic countries.

NEWS

28.02.2017

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER

Life satisfaction among young people in the Nordic region has been falling since 2006. A research project supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers will now attempt to find out why. It will be carried out by a team of Nordic experts on children's health, including Danish professor Pernille Due from Denmark's National Institute of Public Health.

She heads the research programme 'Children and young people's health and well-being', and has for many years been the deputy international coordinator for the WHO study Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC). Every four years the HBSC gathers data on the health and well-being of children and young people across 43 countries, including details about their own life satisfaction.

The Nordic region as a whole does not come out top here, concluded professor Pernille Due, when she presented selected results from the HBSC study during the Nordic Council of Ministers' Oslo summit on psychological health on 27 February.

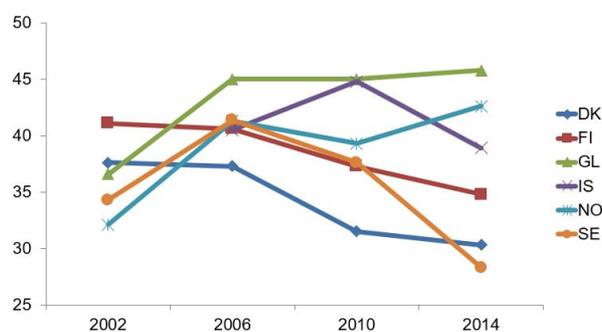
In the middle

Every four years the HBSC gathers a range of data about children aged 11, 13 and 15. The first study took place in 1984/85 and the latest one was carried out in 2014. This makes it possible to look for changing tendencies over a longer period of time. One of them is a fall in life satisfaction, if you look at the Nordic countries as a group.

"From 2002 to 2006 life satisfaction among some Nordic youths rose, but since 2006 it has been falling in four out of the six Nordic Countries. In terms of life satisfaction, the Nordics do not do particularly well among the 43 participating nations. We are somewhere in the middle," explains Pernille Due.

Livstilfredshed - detaljer

9+10 på the Cantril Ladder



The share of young people with high life satisfaction was between 31 % in Norway and 41% in Finland in 2002. In 2014 there are larger differences in the number of young people with high life satisfaction, from 28% in Sweden to 46% in Greenland

Yet there is major internal differences within the Nordic region: Life satisfaction levels have risen in Greenland and Norway, while it has been falling in all of the other Nordic countries, most markedly in Sweden. In 2006, 41 percent of Swedish children and youths said their life satisfaction was top, in 2014 only 28 percent said the same and among 15 year old Swedish girls only 11 percent said they had a high life satisfaction.

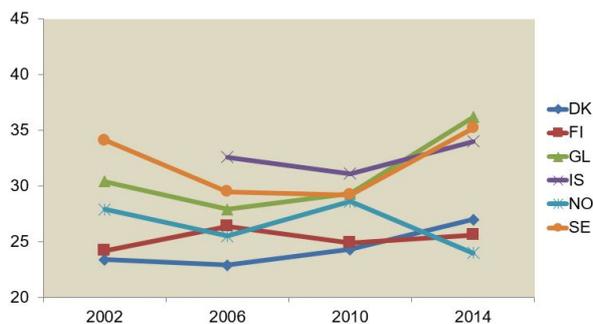
Nervous youths

The HBSC study looks at different symptoms of unhappiness, including whether the respondees each week for instance experience stomach-ache, headaches or nervousness. Pernille Due has focused on the number of young people who each week display at least two symptoms. Here too, the tendency is that Nordic youths do display such symptoms – especially the girls:

In Sweden, Iceland and Greenland one in three young people display two symptoms a week. In Denmark, Norway and Finland one in four do the same. Here too the tendency masks marked differences between the Nordic countries. Danish youths score low, while Swedish girls also here score very high.

Symptomer

2+ symptomer ugentligt





Palestinian, woman, dyslexic – and successful businessperson in Iceland

Fida Abu Libdeh arrived in Iceland aged 16. “I didn’t even understand whether my teacher was trying to teach me Icelandic or Danish. It wasn’t until many years later I learnt I had dyslexia,” she says.

PORTRAIT

14.02.2017

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

She still managed to create her own company, Geosilica, which extracts minerals from the warm water which is pumped out of the ground by geothermal power plants. The main product is silica (silicon dioxide, SiO₂) which is sold as a health product. According to the marketing it can prevent

osteoporosis, strengthen your nails and hair and make your skin more elastic.

Fida Abu Libdeh tells her own life story in brief and simple terms at the conference The Future of Work, hosted in Oslo by the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equality on 7 and 8 February.

“You know what it can be like when you’re 16. I struggled. At school I understood everything that had anything to do with numbers, but it was impossible for me to learn Icelandic. All my teachers thought it was because I was a foreigner, but it turned out to be because I was dyslexic.”

Fida had no trouble reading Arabic.

“That is because Arabic letters are linked up, creating one continuous line. My dyslexia is the kind where individual letters jump about when I try to read them.”

As a result she failed her upper secondary education exams.

“I wrote a letter to the university every year and asked to be allowed to study there despite failing my Icelandic, but was told no every time.”

She was forced to start working in order to keep her permit to stay which she was given when she moved there with her mother.

Only low salary jobs

“Without an education I only got badly paid jobs, of course. I had a lot in common with those working there. Most of us were foreigners, we were unhappy and saw now future in Iceland.

“Ten years after coming here I therefore decided to move back to Palestine in 2004. But when you have lived abroad for that long, you either need a very high education or a lot of money to get by. I had neither. So in 2007 i returned to Iceland. This time I was really determined to finish my education.”

What finally changed her life was when she heard about a private educational institution, the Keilir Institute next to the former American airbase at Keflavik. The students were quartered in old soldier barracks and could gain the necessary competence for further studies at university level.

“My student mentor wondered why my maths and chemistry grades were so good and my language was so poor. She made me sit a test. At the age of 26 I discovered I had dyslexia. I was given an aid linked to my computer which would read texts out loud for me. In one year I went through four years of upper secondary education and could finally start studying at the university.”

She went on to study engineering and did the allocated five years in three and a half.



The geothermal power plants, like Nesjavellir above, produce 40,000 tonnes of silica every year. Geosilica uses only 1,000 tonnes, for the time being. Photo: Gretar Ívarsson

In her final exams she wrote about the warm water used by geothermal power plants. Ground heat is the most important energy source on the volcanic island of Iceland.

“For the power industry the amount of minerals in the warm water is a problem. But before I did it, no-one had asked whether they could be used for something.

“It hit me that the minerals might be useful as health products,” says Fida Abu Libdeh.

She and a fellow student founded the company Geosilica. They developed a unique technology to extract the minerals from the water. Since they both had engineering backgrounds, Fida re-entered the university and got a master degree in business administration. They managed to secure funding from an Icelandic technology development fund and Fida Abu Libdeh also got a grant for female entrepreneurs.

“We got a group of people from different backgrounds and training together, who all had the same goal: to make health products from geothermal water.”



Ágústa Valgeirsdóttir is Geosilica's business developer. Fida Abu Libdeh is a founder and the managing director of the company.

What was the secret to their success?

“That is a difficult question. Is it equality that makes you succeed?”

“When I came to Iceland I was told that when I learned the language I would become equal, but that didn't happen. I only got a low paid job. Then I was told I would become equal as soon as I finished my education. But I didn't.”

Not taken seriously

When she started her company and had meetings in the male dominated power industry, she noticed nobody took her seriously.

“I brought my male business partner and introduced myself as the company director. But nobody wanted to even look at me. Then I thought I'd bring an Icelandic woman instead, Ágústa. But she was blond with blue eyes, so of course they only had eyes for her,” jokes Fida.

“Only when I returned with an Asian woman did I get their attention,” she says.

“I remember telling the head of a power plant that I could make different products from the water. He refused to believe me and only laughed.”

But the final laugh was on her.

“Since he did not listen to me when I explained how valuable these products could be, I negotiated a deal where I got all the silica from the warm water for free, for the entire lifespan of the power plant.”

Large amounts

We are not talking about small amounts. The geothermal power plants in Iceland produce 40,000 tonnes of silica every year.

“We use 1,000 tonnes for our products. For now, Iceland remains our most important market. But six months ago we secured a deal allowing us to sell our products on Amazon. We are planning further expansions, first to Norway. This year, in 2017, we hope to break even.

“Everything began with me getting a chance to study at the Keilir Institute. I jumped at the chance. I think the worst thing is when people don't care whether or not you live in the country. It was not until I experienced a certain belonging that I felt that I had to prove I was capable of more, that I deserved to be treated equally.

“I could say equality leads to success. But progress must come from within yourself. You must have faith in yourself and fight for equality. That is when you move forward.

“I believe the best way to create progress is to give people a sense of belonging,” sums up Fida Abu Libdeh.