

Portrait

Anna Söderbäck: #metoo shows a need for a new type of leadership

News

Nordic politicians on their guard as the EU's new labour authority takes shape

Editorial

Cooperating to stop a race to the bottom

News

Finnish critics: Unemployed punished for inactivity – regardless of their situation

Apr 20, 2018

Theme: Diversity in the labour market – focus on newly arrived women



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**Contents**

Cooperating to stop a race to the bottom	3
Nordic region strengthens cooperation against work-related crime - wants EU onboard	4
Newly arrived immigrant women - more than a labour market project?	9
OECD: More flexibility needed to get female refugees into work	13
Nordic focus on getting more newly arrived women into work	15
Project Mirjam tackles prejudices about and in the Swedish labour market	18
Anna Söderbäck: #metoo shows a need for a new type of leadership	21
Finnish critics: Unemployed punished for inactivity - regardless of their situation	25
Nordic politicians on their guard as the EU's new labour authority takes shape	28
Icelandic companies want to introduce equal pay standard ahead of time	30

Cooperating to stop a race to the bottom

Not everything is perfect, but the Nordics are doing some good things, getting down to business, highlighting problems, considering the measures, wanting to learn from others without erasing political divides. This is also the case when discussing labour market inclusion, #metoo and work-related crime. Broad cooperation aims to make sure things point in the right direction.

EDITORIAL

19.04.2018

BY BERIT KVAM

The illustration of the criminal network shown to the Nordic Council of Ministers for Labour by the head of Norway's Labour Inspection Authority is as convincing as it is frightening. It shows how criminals' activities permeate the labour market, how they spread their actions and try to hide their tracks through a web of legal and illegal activities. The Nordic countries are particularly adept at finding efficient measures against work-related crime, but all are based on good cooperation – between authorities, with the social partners, businesses and across national borders. This should prevent social dumping and a race to the bottom.

The EU Commission has been sent a declaration based on the resolution which the ministers reached in unity. The Nordic region wants the EU to contribute more in the fight against work-related crime.

The European Commission has just proposed a new European labour authority. The Nordic declaration highlights the Nordic perspective in labour market politics.

This month the NLJ tries to present a broad illustration of issues which the Swedish Presidency focused on during the meeting of the Nordic Council of Ministers for Labour. One of them was #metoo, which spread like wildfire through Sweden for some months, and especially in the country's cultural sector. In Portrait we have interviewed the Secretary General for the Swedish Arts Grants Committee Anna Söderbäck. Her experiences from #metoo has made her ask for new types of leadership.

We are also curious about how Icelandic businesses follow up the equal pay legislation which was intro-

duced at the start of the year, and we look at how Finland's activation model works.

Between them, the Nordic countries hold the world record for high female employment rates. The exception is the employment rate among newly arrived women. A comparative study from Oxford Research points out that there is little documentation in the Nordic region of the measures which work. In this month's theme we take a closer look at what is needed for more women to find jobs.

One example of a good labour market measure is project Mirjam, which our reporter describes after visiting Eskilstuna. The OECD's report, which we also write about, focuses on the need for increased flexibility and more tailored and targeted measures.

But, as Sweden's Minister for Labour and Integration Ylva Johansson said in her welcoming speech: We must not stigmatise and create an image of foreign-born women needing help in order to find work. Most are in ordinary jobs, and if foreign-born women did not go to work, Sweden would collapse.

The Norwegian labour minister calls the cooperation with the social partners "the jewel in our crown". That is the common denominator which means the Nordic region can benefit greatly from good cooperation, not least on measures to stop the spread of criminal networks in the labour market.



Nordic region strengthens cooperation against work-related crime – wants EU onboard

It is called the grey economy, social dumping, work-related crime – yet despite the many names the problems are common and concern all of the Nordic region and Europe. This is about criminal networks, pure exploitation of labour, businesses operating on the edge of the law and unequal competition. All this led to a joint resolution at the ministers' meeting in Stockholm on 13 April.

INSIGHT

19.04.2018

TEXT: BERIT KVAM, PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

"The resolution alone has no effect of course, but a joint Nordic decision does have an effect, and the resolution is an expression of that joint decision," says Ylva Johansson, Sweden's Minister for Employment and Integration, who hosted the Nordic Council of Ministers' meeting where government ministers from all of the five Nordic countries gave the decision their unconditional support.

The ministers' agenda also included a debate on the integration of immigrant women into the labour market, and an informal conversation about #metoo.

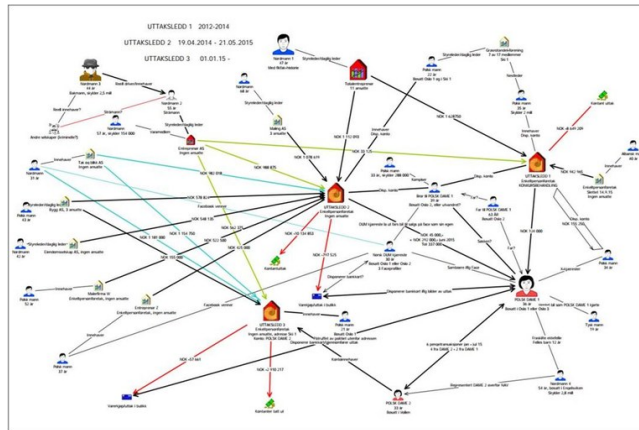


Ylva Johansson has often said that Sweden can learn from the way Norway has organised its fight against work-related crime. Now she had invited Trude Vollheim, Director General of the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, to present an overarching introduction about the work based on her experiences from working with taxation and labour market issues.

Trude Vollheim did not shy away from talking about how challenging this work is both on a national and international level, and how necessary it is to have cooperation between authorities and across borders in order to stop things getting out of control. She described today's situation based on an analysis made by The national intergovernmental analysis and intelligence centre NTAES in 2017.

"Work-related crime is a large and demanding challenge for the Norwegian labour market; for the social partners, the authorities and for businesses. We see that this is becoming an increasingly complex area where criminals develop new methods as soon as they see an opportunity to make a profit, and they adapt their methods in response to the authorities' controls.

"Their work is often organised by shadow operators and complex networks of players. The criminals follow the money and operate across borders – whether these are national or municipal ones. Some crimes also cross different authorities' areas of responsibility, which makes them dependent on each other when fighting this kind of crime."



Example of criminal networks in the labour market (source: The Work Environment Agency)

Norway has long traditions for intergovernmental cooperation in the fight against work-related crime. The Labour Inspectorate, the Tax Administration, NAV, and the police work together in seven centres around the country to combat work-related crime. In other parts of the country where they are not gathered in a centre, they meet regularly. According to Trude Vollheim, this cooperation means each authority uncover more cases of crime than they would have done if working in isolation.



"This is about serious breaches of the Working Environment Act, the exploitation and use of illegal

labour, bankruptcy fraud and working environment crime. Criminal networks and strawmen operate across different trades and sectors, and have spread to more trades than before. These are players, not businesses,” underlined Trude Vollheim, who also pointed to a new trend of people using sole trader companies in order to avoid employer’s responsibilities and minimum wage regulations.

“We see businesses with complex company structures, which are particularly adept at circumventing regulations. They adapt to the authorities’ demands by falsifying documents to make them look real, and by camouflaging their illegal operation by making parts of it appear legal. This mixture of legal and illegal operations makes it difficult to detect. An increasing number of criminals get professional help from lawyers, accountants and consultants.

“The challenge authorities have is how to detect this and then prove what has happened and document the issues.”

According to Trude Vollheim this is a race to develop new methods.

“We have to stay ahead of the game,” she says.

Time is also of the essence when it comes to sentencing. Rapid reactions are important to prevent players disappearing before authorities have a chance to apprehend them, or to make sure they do not do too much damage before being punished.

“Charges and punishment are not always the most efficient tools in the fight against work-related crime, but it is of course important to take certain cases through the courts. Other methods might be more suitable, like rapid sanctions through bureaucratic channels, fines and the seizing of equipment.”

A concrete debate

“We got a very concrete debate between ministers, inspired by Trude Vollheim. It was more concrete than what we are used to from our political debates,” Ylva Johansson told the Nordic Labour Journal.

“We obviously share many things both in terms of the problems we face, the way in which things are escalating and moving to new sectors, but also how much we have in common when it comes to which measures we have been implementing. We can clearly learn from each country’s measures and cooperate on this,” she said.

“We will follow up this field during the Presidency programme with an expert meeting in August, where experts from the Nordic countries and the Baltics

will attend together with the social partners. I hope we will then see concrete results and improvements as a result of the Swedish Presidency.”

Trude Vollheim also underlined the importance of international cooperation. Norway has cooperation agreements with authorities in Lithuania, Bulgaria, Poland and Estonia. Romania is next. Several Nordic countries, including Denmark, have also entered into bilateral agreements with one or several countries

A joint resolution

The joint resolution which was adapted at the ministers’ meeting addresses the specific conditions in the Nordic labour markets and the measures against work-related crime. The aim is to secure just working conditions and fair competition. The resolution will be presented to the EU Commission.

“This is also work which is being carried out inside the EU. It is often the case that work-related crime involves players from other EU countries who are exploiting the free movement of labour, which can allow them to go under the radar when it comes to crime. So these are important issues for the European cooperation. It is also important to highlight our joint standpoint and our joint decisions on these issues,” said Ylva Johansson.

She felt the good reception she got from her ministerial colleagues for raising these questions during the Presidency, means we could also be seeing some effects from this.

There was clear engagement in the debate between colleagues both from the Nordic countries and the autonomous areas. The Faroe Islands representative, Director of Cabinet Affairs RÚni Joensen, pointed out that this is an area over which the autonomous government does not have all the control.

Labour inspection and taxation belongs to the autonomous authority’s responsibilities, while the police is controlled from Denmark. This is a problem when it comes to coordinating measures between government offices. At the same time, he underlines how useful the debate is.

“What is happening in the Nordic region will sooner or later arrive in the Faroe Islands.”

Head of department Jakob Jensen from Denmark’s Ministry of Employment, said he recognised the picture presented by Trude Vollheim, and on behalf of his government minister he expressed how useful the joint resolution agreed by the Nordic countries was.

Finland has also been working with different strategies for fighting work-related crime. They have found systems that work, particularly for the construction trade. Finland's Minister of Labour Jari Lindström underlined the importance of cooperating with the social partners in this area, and added:

"We think the Nordic cooperation works very well. If it also works on a European level, we get an even better cooperation. By working together we can defend the Nordic labour markets' position."

Tripartite cooperation is the jewel in the crown

"The tripartite cooperation is the jewel in the crown for the Nordic countries, where authorities and the partners work together in order to find good solutions. The Norwegian rules have been developed together with the partners to make sure they remain relevant," said Anniken Hauglie from Norway, who also praised the Swedish Presidency for putting the issue on the agenda.

"This is an area which has been a priority for Norway over many years. We think it is important to bring it onto the agenda here, because it is very clear that the fight against work-related crime cannot be solved by individual countries alone. We need good cooperation between the countries," she told the Nordic Labour Journal.

"The Nordic countries share a lot when it comes to how we have developed structures and systems, which means it is pretty easy to borrow good ideas from each other and make this national policy."

What role can a joint resolution like this play?

"The idea is to highlight the Nordic perspective and how we view labour market policies. We are keen to maintain national sovereignty over labour market policies. This is because we have strong partners with great influence when it comes to issues like wage formation. So we want to highlight the Nordic perspective when the EU continues its work with a labour authority."

During the EU's informal meeting of employment ministers in Sofia on 17 to 18 April, Anniken Hauglie is meeting EU Commissioner Marianne Thyssen in a separate meeting. The fight against work-related crime will be up for discussion.

"So for me it will be good to bring this resolution in order to amplify and underline the Nordic perspective. Last year Prime Minister Erna Solberg presented the Commission with an initiative to fight work-related crime. I see it as my role to underline the

Nordic perspective. And now I have serious help from the Nordic countries through this resolution.

Integrating immigrant women

When the Nordic ministers meet to talk, there are always a range of issues of common interest on the agenda. An important part of the meeting is to brief each other on new labour market measures. At this year's meeting the Swedish Presidency also hosted a conference on the integration of immigrant women into the labour market.



A joint debate was organised between the ministers where the OECD Director for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Stefano Scarpetta also participated. This is an area where there are bigger differences between the countries, commented Ylva Johansson, who nevertheless was pleased with the outcome of the debate.

"I think there was much concrete and common ground there too, even though we do differ quite a lot in this area. Sweden has welcomed far more refugees than all of the other Nordic countries. Some countries, like Iceland, have extremely few refugees. So we have very different starting points here, yet I still feel there is a lot we can learn from each other.

"I recognised the discussion on measures being implemented on a local level. As Anniken Hauglie said, if the measures are only to be implemented locally, you end up with a postcode lottery as to which municipalities work with what, and in which way. That is exactly the experience we have from Sweden. Here, the Public Employment Service has been given the responsibility after the review."

Sharing experiences is useful, as the ministers say. There are some shared elemental social structures that give this cooperation power. The OECD director Stefano Scarpetta also underlines that the Nordic countries' willingness to learn from each other is unique. He has visited many other countries that refuse to acknowledge they can learn anything from other countries, because they believe they are so special themselves. In the Nordic region there is great willingness to learn and to improve things.

This is also some of the background for the policy brief which Dagfinn Høybråten, Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers, had commissioned in the wake of the debate at last year's meeting in Norway. So he was able to present 'Policy brief: Labour market integration in the Nordic countries: Measures that work when non-western refugees and immigrants find work'.

#metoo

During last year's ministers' meeting, Ylva Johansson was fiercely engaged in the issues surrounding metoo. Now, during Sweden's Presidency, she invited the Nordic ministers to an informal debate on metoo before the dinner hosted on the eve of the ministers' meeting. Anna Söderbäck, Secretary General for the Swedish Arts Grants Committee gave a speech in the run-up to the debate between the ministers.

"I felt it was a good debate," commented Ylva Johansson.

"This is something all of the countries have experienced. I think all of us will use this power and this state of mind to make sure we make changes to what is going on in the workplaces, where subordination and sexual harassment must be put higher on the working environment agenda. Employers carry the full responsibility for making sure there is no offensive behaviour or harassment. The authorities can make sure the employers live up to their responsibilities."

Is it your impression that your ministerial colleagues are interested in these issues?

"Yes, and that they want to use the necessary power in order to make change happen."

How would you conclude the debate about metoo?



"I think it is important that this does not turn into a temporary alert, but that it is the beginning of major change. That is why it made me so happy to hear Iceland's Ásmundur Einar Daðason say that this would be followed up during the Icelandic Presidency. I believe that will be a very good thing. Our task as politicians and ministers is to secure that this power becomes a part of everyday work, and that it brings changes."

Iceland holds the Presidency for the Nordic cooperation in 2019. Ásmundur Einar Daðason considers the #metoo issues to be part of the bigger issue of gender equality in the labour market. That is why it will remain an important issue which Iceland will promote during its Presidency in combination with a conference on the Future of work and the ILO's centenary celebrations from 1 to 4 April 2019.



Newly arrived immigrant women – more than a labour market project?

682,948 non-western immigrants arrived in the Nordic region between 2010 and 2015. The aim is to integrate as many of them as possible into the labour market. The challenge is greatest for female refugees, who often face discrimination in their native countries and again risk being discriminated against in their new home country.

THEME

19.04.2018

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

“Statistics show that foreign-born newly arrived women face considerable difficulties accessing the labour market, more than other groups,” said Sweden’s Minister for Employment Ylva Johansson as she opened a Nordic conference on labour market integration with a special focus on women in Stockholm on 13 April.

“But it is important to remember that the norm for a foreign-born woman is that she works. We should not stigmatise and paint a picture where foreign-born women normally will need our help to access the labour market. The vast majority work in completely ordinary jobs and are crucial for the running

of this society. If foreign-born women did not go to work, Sweden would collapse!”

A full day was used to discuss the differences between the Nordic countries when welcoming newly arrived women; which measures work and how civil society contributes to the integration process. A still to be published OECD report which sums up the challenges was debated by the labour ministers.



From left: Anniken Hauglie, Norway; Jari Lindström, Finland; Ásmundur Einar Daðason, Iceland; Camilla Gunell, Åland; Ylva Johansson, Sweden and Stefano Scarpetta, OECD. The moderator Sharon Jåma Hofvander is to the right.

Jakob Jensen, head of department at Denmark’s Ministry of Employment, pointed out that things are developing fast:

“The OECD’s statistics for Denmark would look different if they had been able to include the latest figures. The proportion of refugees entering the labour market has risen from 20 percent in 2015 to 38 percent in Q4 of 2017,” he pointed out.

What works?

Parallel with the conference, the Council of Ministers has also prepared a policy brief for what works and what does not when it comes to labour market integration in the Nordic region.

Three main types of measures can be found in various forms across the Nordic countries:

- Wage subsidies and in-work training
- Conversations and guidance about jobs
- Measures to increase competencies

One policy difference is whether refugees’ competencies are improved before they face the labour market – train-and-place – or whether training best happens in the workplace – place-and-train. In Fin-

land the former dominates, in Denmark it is the latter.

“In Norway we have now gone for a different solution by moving integration issues to the Ministry of Education and Research. Many immigrant women not only have low competencies, they have none at all. So the answer is education, education, education,” said Norway’s Minister of Labour, Anniken Hauglie.

The Danish policy of wage subsidies and language training in the workplace has worked well – in Denmark. The time refugees remain unemployed has been cut on average by between three to 15 months. Similar results are not found in Norway and Finland.

Conversations and guidance about work has a positive effect in Finland, Sweden and Denmark, but it is a relatively small one. In Sweden 5.8 percent more found work compared to those who had not had access to such conversations.

Outreach programmes

Several ministers also underlined the importance of outreach programmes for women who ‘missed the train’ the first time, and for preventing that women stay at home with children for 20 years, not accessing the labour market.

The conference also heard about several projects aimed at immigrant women, including project Mirjam, which the Nordic Labour Journal writes about here.



“Project Mirjam uses conversations and group discussions with advisors from the Employment Service, and study visits to different workplaces. We try to expand the view of where women can work,” said Magdalena Gustavsson.

“One of the occupations we looked at was excavator operator. The fact that women can have that as a job appeared very strange to us,” explained Nagham Sannoufi, one of the project Mirjam participants.

“Although the excavators are super heavy, we were shown how they can be operated in similar ways to how you operate a PlayStation or computer.”

Since many of the women arrive with small children, or give birth during their first years after arriving, it is important to have measures that reach this group too.

“Language is so incredibly important to build trust. As a parent I have to be able to make sure my children are happy in their preschool. If I feel I cannot communicate well with the preschool staff, my bar for wanting to use child care services will be set very high,” said Anna-Karin Gustafsson, an analyst at Oxford Research.

She has carried out a comparative study of newly arrived women’s integration into the labour market in the Nordic region (read the NLJ’s interview with her here).

In Norway, immigrant children are offered 20 hours of preschool a week for free, and Stockholm runs a project with special integration preschools. But certain measures also risk locking immigrant women in. The childcare allowance, given to families that choose to stay at home to look after children, has now been abandoned in Sweden, but is still common in Finland where 90 percent of all families use it at some stage.

Municipalities and civil society play a major role in the integration process across the Nordic region.

When 160,000 refugees arrived in Sweden over just a few months in 2015, the Studieförbunden, the umbrella organisation for Swedish non-formal adult education, immediately stepped up to the challenge. The state offered adult education for asylum seekers. Since 2015, 120,000 people have attended the courses ‘Swedish from day 1’ and ‘Everyday Swedish’.

Important to include the whole person

This year, Sweden will invest 40 million kronor (€3.3m) in adult education outreach projects. A further 50 (€4.8m) will be allocated each year for two years after that.



“It is important to include the whole person in society. This is not only about accommodation and work,” pointed out David Samuelsson, Secretary General for the Studieförbunden later in the day.

“If a refugee gets a job cleaning offices at night, she will not learn the language at work.”

Women-only courses

It is also important to be flexible.

“Immigrant women come from a patriarchal culture where it is not always possible for them to participate in courses for both men and women. That is why we have organised courses for women participants only, with female course leaders,” said David Samuelson.

Women refugees do not represent a homogenous group, pointed out Hjördis Rut Sigurjónsdóttir and Mari Wøien, who have been studying two projects at opposite ends of the scale: Korta vägen (Short cut) targets immigrant women with higher education, and aims to speed up the process of upgrading their competencies, and BaZar, which aims to give immigrant women enough Swedish language skills to be able to shop, communicate with a preschool and master other everyday tasks.

A relatively large number of the Syrian refugees who arrived in Sweden in 2015 were teachers. Korta vägen provides an intensive course in Swedish targeted at this group. 764 foreign teachers have taken part.

“Both projects were successful. 70 percent of the women who participated in Korta vägen found work,” said Hjördis Rut Sigurjónsdóttir.

“Women participating in BaZar got language skills which gave their self-confidence a real boost,” said Mari Wøien.



Nafisa Yeasmin from the University of Lapland presented her list of the ten biggest obstacles facing newly arrived women who want to access the labour market. In her home city of Rovaniemi there are still employers who are not used to immigrants and fail to call them in for job interviews, she said.

The situation in northern Iceland is somewhat different, said Professor Marcus Meckl from the University of Akureyri, who has done research on immigration to the area:

“The problem is not that the immigrant women are unemployed, but that the job they get does not fit with their qualifications. In one of our surveys, 30 percent of the immigrant women said their jobs did not correlate with their backgrounds. Only eight percent of Icelandic women said the same.

“As they are not registered as unemployed, nobody is helping them. They also often have low self-confidence, and are far more critical to their own language skills than male immigrants – despite the fact that their skills are often better,” said Marcus Meckl.



OECD: More flexibility needed to get female refugees into work

There is a need for more flexible measures to integrate newly arrived refugee women in the Nordic region, according to the OECD. Research shows that after years of fleeing, birth rates increase dramatically. When women feel safe, they have children – but that also makes it difficult for them to benefit from labour market introduction programmes.

THEME

19.04.2018

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The OECD has studied why a clearly smaller fraction of refugee women join the Nordic labour markets, not only in relation to those who already live there, but also in relation to men who arrive as refugees.

“While men fairly quickly increase their employment rate during the first five to nine years after arriving, before participation reaches its peak, there is less of an increase for women. But the participation continues to increase for 10 to 15 years before it peaks,”

Stefano Scarpetta, Director for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs at the OECD, told the Nordic Council of Ministers' conference on refugee women's integration into the labour market on 13 April.

The OECD study has not yet been published, but Scarpetta presented some of its results. Determining which factors influence labour market participation for a refugee woman is a bit of a statistical nightmare, however, since there are so many different aspects to take into consideration:

- Which country does the refugee come from?
- What education does she have?
- What has she been working with before?
- How gender equal is her home society?
- How does childbirth influence the situation?
- What is her health situation?

Newly arrived refugee women usually have a worse starting point across all of these areas compared to male refugees. The only 'positive' aspect is that fewer women have sought asylum. Women make up 30 percent of all asylum seekers in Europe, but make up 45 percent of the refugee population. This is because the men often flee first, while women and children join them later through family reunion programmes.

High education resulting in the wrong job?

Although it is difficult to determine which factor is most important, women who arrive from more gender equal societies have a greater chance of accessing the labour market. If they have a higher education, the chance increases dramatically – with more than 40 percentage points. At the same time, they run a great risk of ending up in jobs they are overqualified for.

Since unemployment is low and welfare is high in the Nordic countries, you get a somewhat skewed picture if you only focus on differences in participation between immigrant women and native born women. The extreme case is Iceland, where immigrant women actually have a higher participation rate in the Icelandic labour market than native born women have in their respective labour markets in 13 EU member states.

The difference is also big compared to the countries from which they have fled.

Fleeing is better despite everything

"The women refugees often come from countries with poor education systems, low employment rates for women and a large degree of gender inequality. If you compare refugee women in their host countries

to women in their country of origin, the former are doing better," according to the OECD report.

In the host country, however, they get less support than male refugees, both when it comes to language training and labour market measures. But things are about to change. Several OECD countries like Canada, Germany and Sweden are increasingly focusing on targeting measures at immigrant women.

"Statistics from Sweden show that this has a positive effect on employment rates, even though the effect is lesser for women with small children and/or low education," says Stefano Scarpetta.



Nordic focus on getting more newly arrived women into work

To succeed in getting more newly arrived women into work, the Nordic countries need more employment measures, an increased focus on childcare and documented results from measures, according to a new study.

IN FOCUS

19.04.2018

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO OXFORD RESEARCH

The employment rate for Nordic women is world-leading, but there is one great exception: Women who have arrived to the Nordics either as refugees, in need of other types of protection or as relatives of people who need protection. Many do not manage to enter into the labour market after gaining their residence permits. This needs to change, and it is possible to do so.

That is the conclusion in a new study from the Nordic Council of Ministers, carried out by the analytics company Oxford Research.

‘Integrating newly arrived women: A comparative study of the integration of newly arrived women into the Nordic labour market and political integration measures’.

The study shows the employment rate among newly arrived women as a group is considerably lower than that of newly arrived men, which again is far below the average employment rate for citizens born in the Nordic region. Many newly arrived women also remain outside of the labour market for a very long period of time – often more than five years. In Denmark and Finland, two in three women do not have a job ten years after arriving.

The study maps and sums up what the Nordic countries are doing to get newly arrived women into work. It shows that measures vary from country to country, but access to them is fairly equal. None of the Nordic countries have solved the Gordian knot, according to one of the study's main authors, Anna-Karin Gustafsson. She is an analyst with Oxford Research specialising in labour market issues and gender equality.

"We cannot say any of the Nordic countries are leading the way when it comes to getting newly arrived women into the labour market. All the countries have certain challenges that seem not to have been solved," she says.

More job-oriented measures

The study points to a range of structural challenges which act as obstacles to newly arrived women's chances for employment. Across the Nordics, integration measures lack initiatives that are specially targeted at these women. Measures in all of the countries are based on a person's individual needs and skills – not gender.

"Measures aimed at women are extremely rare when it comes to national introduction measures. Gender equality is highlighted in political documents, but are very hard to trace in the concrete measures," Oxford Research says in the study.

It also concludes that newly arrived women are being discriminated against. They are not being offered job-oriented introduction measures to the same extent as newly arrived men.

"All the Nordic countries have introduction programmes aimed at getting newly arrived people into work, but we see that women to a lesser degree than men have access to programmes which are workplace-oriented."

The study shows that workplace-oriented measures are most efficient when it comes to getting participants into work, but it is newly arrived men who are most often offered measures like traineeships, while women are typically offered measures which do not

involve direct contact with workplaces, says Anna-Karin Gustafsson.

Why this is the case is unclear, but language skills could be a contributing factor, she believes:

"Research shows that language represent a greater challenge for women than for men in the labour market. The reason why is still not clear, but it could be because these women, to a greater extent than men, get jobs in sectors where communication is important, or employers expect better communication skills from women in a recruitment situation – in which case we are talking about pure discrimination."

Focus on childcare

Another structural obstacle facing newly arrived women is children and childcare, explains Anna-Karin Gustafsson. The Nordic countries, with their relatively cheap and easy access to childcare while at work, are unique. But for newly arrived women this throws up a range of challenges.

"This group of women use day care to a far lesser extent than others, and look after their children themselves at home. We have no clear answer as to why this is the case, but if these women are offered evening and night work they will struggle to find childcare, and might have to turn job offers down."

Another important factor is the fact that having other people look after your children is not the tradition in the countries many of the newly arrived women come from. If the mothers also do not speak the local language, it can be difficult to communicate with day care staff who are looking after their children, which might feel very unsafe.

Anna-Karin Gustafsson therefore recommends that the Nordic countries do more to inform newly arrived women and families about Nordic childcare in a language which the women understand. More flexible opening hours should also be considered, so that newly arrived women do not have to say no to evening and night work because of a lack of childcare, recommends Anna-Karin Gustafsson.

The report also points out that access to parental leave and childcare allowance hampers newly arrived women's access to the labour market, as their links to the labour market are weak in the first place. To address this problem, Sweden and Norway have introduced reforms aimed at limiting newly arrived women's access to these measures, in order to give them more incentive to work. It is still too early to assess what effect this has had, says Anna-Karin Gustafsson.

Evidence is needed

It is unclear whether low employment rates among newly arrived women could also be due to some of them preferring to stay at home, or that their husbands want them to do that. But it cannot be ruled out, thinks Anna-Karin Gustafsson.

“The women interviewed for this study were very motivated to find work. But it could be a factor, and it would be a very interesting issue to explore because it is difficult to reach any conclusions on this based on existing studies.”

What surprised Anna-Karin Gustafsson the most while carrying out the study, was the lack of evidence for whether measures introduced by Nordic countries in this area have worked.

“Several Nordic countries have very comprehensive integration programmes, but do not systematically assess their effect – despite the fact that this knowledge ought to be essential for the formation of policies and further measures in this area,” she says.

She believes this is an important area for Nordic cooperation.

“If Nordic countries started to cooperate systematically in order to assess the effect of these measures and share that data, it could have a major and rapid effect when it comes to targeting the measures in order to get more newly arrived women up and running in the Nordic labour market.”

She also believes it would help to study what happens to women who do find work: Do they get full-time or part-time jobs? Are they hired on short term contracts more often than other groups of employees? Do they get jobs where they can use their education?



Project Mirjam tackles prejudices about and in the Swedish labour market

Project Mirjam targets women with low levels of education who have been granted asylum or residency in Sweden. It is considerably harder for them to find work compared to men in a similar situation, but guidance focused on work and gender equality produces results.

IN FOCUS

19.04.2018

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN

“Women in our countries have no self-confidence when it comes to finding work, as we do not work out in the community. But this project opens doors for women,” says Kurdish Aria Ahmadi, who is 24.

In a perfectly ordinary, small conference room on the first floor of the Eskilstuna job centre, the world is opening up.



Aria Ahmadi is one of 15 women taking part in project Mirjam, a gender equality project financed by the European Social Fund ESF. It is aimed at women with low levels of education who are far outside of the labour market. The room is full of women of all ages and many different nationalities.

Five interpreters are needed to translate what is being said into the languages represented in the room.

Not just male

Today the Swedish Forest Agency is visiting. They are looking for 18 participants for a one year long nature project, where those who get hired will be taught how to take stock of trees, clearing forests, maintaining cultural monuments and nature service areas and much more. They would like to recruit both men and women, and now try to get the women interested in what traditionally has been seen as male-dominated work.

The Forest Agency has been given this task by the government, and the idea is to allow the participants to try many different things and learn how the Swedish labour market works. The job is covered by a collective agreement, but does not lead to permanent employment.

“Look at it as an opportunity to get a reference from the Swedish labour market. Work experience is very important in Sweden and highly valued by employers,” says Anna Wilder, who runs project Mirjam in Eskilstuna together with Gianna Michelotti Husblad.

The visit from the Forest Agency is a typical example of what project Mirjam is about. Using study trips and invited guests, it aims to break down prejudices about what is considered to be typical male and female jobs. The other week the course participants were taught about green jobs.

“Through Mirjam we get to learn about how women can work in Sweden, and that there is no difference between men and women,” says Aria Ahmadi.

Gender equality guidance

Project Mirjam began in 2016 and will run until January 2019 in six different places across Sörmland and Östergötland. So far some 500 women have attended the ten weeks long course. The aim is to get the women into work or education after their introductory phase, as well as finding ways of shortening the road to employment. One way of doing this is to show the women which job opportunities exist in more male-dominated occupations.

During the ten weeks, the women meet three hours a day, five days a week. During this time, they also

study the Swedish language. They are put into groups and given guidance in how the Swedish labour market works, with a focus on gender equality. They cover issues like terms of employment and how to achieve a good work-life balance.

“This daily contact allows us to get to know the women, and to see their experiences and skills. Even though none of them have more than ten years of schooling, and are called low-skilled, they have after all been working, albeit mostly for free,” says Gianna Michelotti Husblad.

“We see a clear difference from day one to the end of the ten weeks. They grow and understand that they know more than they thought they did. One of the more important things has been for them to hear employers tell them ‘we need to hire more women’. Our goal is for them to approach the Swedish labour market and understand that they can get jobs,” says Anna Wilder.

No homogenous group

Each week the participants visit two different workplaces. Sometimes the participants are amazed. This happens when they see a modern factory, or any environment or workplace where women work – even well into their pregnancies. For many, this would be unthinkable in the countries they came from. Special inspirators are invited every week to talk about how to set up a company, about their career or their life journey. Each course participant is also given a mentor.

“Our study visits become a meeting place between employers and the women, and we see that they become interested in these women. They see that there is a will here,” says Anna Wilder.

There can be big differences between the different women’s education and experience. Each group usually have some illiterate people, who need to be given many partial goals since the road to employment for them is long.

“When you talk about women with low education it is important to realise that this is no homogenous group. Some might not have attended school at all, others went to school for five years and some have got as far as starting their upper secondary education. What we do is to lift their experiences and skills, and look at what they have been doing before, regardless of their education levels,” says Gianna Michelotti Husblad.

Five languages under her belt

Aria Ahmadi is one example of how little a term like ‘women with low levels of education who are far

away from the labour market' actually means or explains. She does tick the boxes for participation in project Mirjam – not having more than ten years of schooling – but she speaks Kurdish, Persian, Arabic, Turkish, English and very good Swedish considering she has only spent a few years in Sweden. "I manage without an interpreter," she says, and this is absolutely true.

She has been a refugee all her life. Born in Iraq, she was five when she fled to Turkey on foot with her family. But being Kurdish became increasingly difficult in Turkey, so she and her family fled again. This time on what she calls 'the boat of death', and a deadly dangerous journey to Greece. She has now got a permit to stay in Sweden, and sees two alternatives for a future job. She would like to be either a nurse or a pharmacist.

"I want to try to forget about my past, and start a new life. I want a good education, and to work with people. I want to be able to give something back to my new country," says Aria Ahmadi.

She is very happy to be able to take part in project Mirjam. It has helped her understand the labour market and what skills employers are looking for. She lists what Swedish employees should possess: Self-confidence, good listening skills, punctuality, taking responsibility and having a positive attitude to other people.

"It is very important to understand how to relate to other people when you arrive in a new society. It is also important to learn how to stand on your own two feet and become independent – this does not happen in my native country of Kurdistan, since we have no right to go out and find work," she explains.

Age a greater obstacle than being a woman

Eman Murad arrived in Sweden in the autumn of 2015 and turned 50 on the day she arrived. She finished her upper secondary education in her home country, and worked as a facilitator in a preschool. She arrived with her husband and two children. Eman Murad is not particularly tempted by the Forest Agency's offer of working in the forest. "I hate the cold," she says. She is, however, happy to be part of project Mirjam.

"It is a wonderful project and I learn things I did not know before. We learn that women can, for instance, be bus drivers, taxi drivers or cleaners. This is not common in Syria. I did not know that there are so many occupations where women can work," she says.

"But perhaps the best thing of all is that I dare talk more now, and I understand far more Swedish. I feel I am getting experienced when it comes to jobs, society and language," she adds.

Eman Murad believes her age is the greatest obstacle for entering into the labour market, not the fact that she is a woman. Her daughters quickly found jobs in Sweden, even before getting their residency permits or learning the language. They now have permanent jobs. She has herself applied for different jobs now, but so far there have been no answers. Yet things are beginning to look up. After a visit to H&M's warehouse, she has been called in for an interview for a summer job.

"A lot is expected from us. So it is important that we are being encouraged to take the first step, and that does happen here," says Eman Murad.

She is now worried that she has only a few years left to get into the labour market, but if she had the choice she would work with food. That is something she knows how to do.

Having hope is key

The three years long project Mirjam is nearing its end. The last group will start in less than one year from now. A more comprehensive assessment will soon be published, but you can already see that more women have found jobs and more have sought work in male-dominated workplaces.

In Eskilstuna some 75 women have taken part in the project, or are doing it right now. Five of the women in the current group will join the Forest Agency's project, six women from previous groups have found work and some are getting started. Several others have begun studying. But perhaps the most important thing is that the women have been given hope that they will be able to find work.

"It is important to do something for these women, and it has been a privilege to see them grow. We don't usually hug at work, but here we do. We become so close," says Anna Wilder.



Anna Söderbäck: #metoo shows a need for a new type of leadership

#metoo has spread like wildfire across the Nordic region. In Sweden, 65 different trades gathered their stories under different banners. First were the artists with hashtags like #tystnadtagning (silence, filming) and #ViSjungerUt (we're singing out). Anna Söderbäck also shared her experiences. Now she is calling for a new type of leadership.

PORTRAIT

19.04.2018

TEXT: BERIT KVAM, PHOTO: JOHAN WESTIN, KONSTNÄRSNÄMDEN

Anna Söderbäck is the Secretary General for the Swedish Arts Grants Committee. Their primary task is to provide grants and support to artists and to promote the development of art. But the Committee also keeps an eye on and analyses the artists' economic and social situation.

She has spent a lifetime working artistically, organisational and politically within the world of art. Still, stories published on Facebook during #ViSjungerUt

surpassed her imagination both in numbers and gravity.

As a former international opera singer, Anna Söderbäck has experienced both assault and harassment.

"Yes, I can say that. This is why I quit as a singer. It cost too much, in the wrong way."

She has two accounts to illustrate this:

"When I said no to a sexual demand from the head of one of Europe's largest agencies in Vienna, he tore up the contract I had been given after my audition. The other example is from Sweden. After auditioning at a Swedish opera house, I was told I was the best singer but that my breasts were too small for the role.

"The art world is a very tough trade, especially for women, but also overall. There are very few female leads both in opera and theatre. More women are trained than men, the competition is enormous and there is a lot of focus on age.

"Between graduating from opera school until having my first child, I had many job offers and grants. When I gave birth, I chose to stay at home with my child. Between my two children there was slightly fewer jobs, and after my second child the telephone went quiet."

A long career

Anna Söderbäck wanted to carry on singing. She decided to continue by organising her own singing career and began producing and staging shows together with colleagues. She particularly remembers the first one: 'Akutföreställningen La mamma' (The Emergency Show La Mamma), she laughs.

"We were three opera singers in late stage pregnancies who wrote the script, put together the music and played the show up until two weeks before I gave birth. The story is about being pregnant, life as a singer with children and the whole problem of art and family life.

After a while there was more production and less singing. More and more artists wanted her to produce their shows. A big change came when Martin Fröst, the great clarinettist and conductor, wanted her to join him and be the project leader for a major chamber music festival.

"I couldn't say no."

Later she engaged in arts politics, and led the Swedish Union for Theatre's singers' branch for 10 years before being approached by KLYS, the Swedish Joint Committee for Artistic and Literary Professionals, an umbrella organisation for all trade unions representing artists in Sweden.

"I spend five years there working nationally and internationally both on a Nordic and an EU level."

She has taken her own path. After getting involved politically, she was hired as head of culture at Region Uppsala, and six months ago she was offered the job

as the Secretary General for the Swedish Arts Grants Committee, a state authority under the Ministry of Culture. Her career trajectory has been steep. Today she thinks it is exciting to be able to use her broad experience: from municipal and regional levels, politically, international and now national levels and the leadership of an overarching art policy.

"The roles might be somewhat different, but I have been working with the same issues all along."

A need for more women in leadership

Anna Söderbäck is interested in leadership, which she believes is about trusting employees and giving them the opportunity to participate in decision-making.

"I am an open person," she says.

When I ask what she means by that, the keyword is 'trust-based management'.

"That is when everyone shares the responsibility. I am responsible at the end of the day, of course.

"I think it is important to lead and manage based on trust, and to be available and to get to know your employees, be present, listen and use the expertise which is there, not believing you know best. Delegate with a mandate.

"I would call it a female leaderships style. It can also be carried out by men. It is about daring to expose your soft side and becoming more inclusive.

"This is what #metoo is all about. You need an including leadership, and you must include both men and women, assailant and victim, both must get support. No-one should be judged without a crime having been committed. A good society means that we need to include everyone, because there are all kinds of people. Yet leaders must be very clear about what is acceptable.

"You need to dare to address what is happening, to see it, speak up and talk about it. Trust-based leadership also means employees must take responsibility."

Also in the Swedish Academy

It is 13 April and the Swedish Academy is in the middle of a crisis.

"If we're talking about the Swedish Academy, for instance, you must dare to look at the structures. What is happening right now is that women yet again are forced into silence. No-one is talking about what is happening. They don't talk to, but try to get rid of Sara Danius. I don't know whether this is on pur-

pose, but the structures are so strong that the women become silent.

"We must allow a new kind of leadership to emerge, and we must talk about things. We must allow women to be bosses, not just make up the choir line.

"Since age 30, I have lowered the average age on different music-related boards and made them more female. Men have always been running things. Men have always set the agenda. Men have always made the decisions, who should watch when you speak, who you sit next to, who you exclude and who you include. Things have got better, but it is a slow process. #metoo has sped things up, for better or worse.

"That is what is so interesting with #metoo," she says enthusiastically. We all know what it is like to be a woman, but we do not always talk about it, especially when we are in positions of power. We talk woman to woman, privately. But that is what was different with #metoo. The private sphere was lifted into the public sphere on a collective basis."

This is where the sad story comes. When innocence was stolen. Sad, but something she has managed to turn into a strength.

"I was raped at 14 by an older musician, a trumpet player I had been admiring greatly. He was like a god to me, and he exploited that. I am sure several adults could have stopped it, but nobody did. We have to look at structures. To see when someone is exploiting someone else. You have to see and take responsibility for what you are as an adult. You cannot do that as a 14 year old. You cannot read what is happening. You don't understand the signals that are being sent out, and you don't see the signals you yourself send out.

"What is happening now, is that women are starting to talk to each other. In my network, women have been mentors for the younger ones, because it is the young ones who need support. They are the ones who are vulnerable.

"Me, I carried this with me for six years before telling my mother, and my brother, and was told that this man had violated others. This has taught me that you must talk, be open, listen, support, speak up. In my professional life, since leaving opera school at 30, I have always spoken out. That is why I have never experienced this in my professional life, but I have been a victim and I have put a stop to it."

If people dare to take what is now happening seriously, it will be a revolution.

Among politicians at Rosenbad

It is 13 April, the day after Sara Danius stepped down as permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, the first woman to hold that position since the Academy was established in 1786. This is where the Nobel Prize in Literature is awarded, and a range of other prizes. The Swedish Academy also carries out important work as one of the pillars of Sweden's literary universe.

"I would say that all actions give birth to a reaction, and that is what we are seeing now. That is what I believe is happening in the Swedish Academy: 'We must get the focus away from all this #metoo business. We cannot let it happen, because it threatens our position of power.'

"I think this is the fear of change. A revolution is in the wings if things go the way it was meant to go. We already see that women are better educated than men, and that girls do better in school than boys. Still men remain in leading positions. If this were to change, it would be a threat to many people. I see it as an opportunity, but you need to get men on your side."

It is 13 April. Anna Söderbäck, in her role as Secretary General for the Swedish Arts Grants Committee, is invited to dinner at Rosenbads Gästsalar, held for Nordic government ministers during their meeting in Stockholm. Ylva Johansson is hosting and has asked Anna Söderbäck to give a talk on #metoo as an introduction to an informal discussion around the table.

The Swedish Arts Grants Committee is responsible for keeping an eye on and analyse artists' economic and social situation. Anna Söderbäck is at the helm.

"In Sweden, #metoo began among artists. This could have something to do with artists' special situation," she says in her talk about the artists' situation for the Nordic ministers. She also talks openly about how she was stopped on the international stage, put frames what is personal to her in a more general tone about artists' conditions.

Artists often work alone, are often self-employed, responsible for their own working environment and must negotiate about this with different clients. They are vulnerable. She refers to the report 'Artists' working environments', which says 40 percent of artists most often have no-one to turn to when work becomes difficult – some never have – compared to 15 percent in working life in general. Four percent say they have been victims of sexual harassment in the past year (2016). Most of them are young.

“Exploiting your position of power with young artists who are in a relationship of dependency, or with students who admire a teacher or older colleague, is unacceptable.”

The sexualisation of young women and sometime men in art; be it on stage, in films, dance or music, is so common that we often do not react. We talk about artistic freedom when it really is about unreflecting power structures and improper use of power, and this is exactly what #metoo is about, Anna Söderbäck tells listening ministers.

Her words stimulate a discussion around the tale. When the meeting is over, she is of the impression that there is a will for change:

“I feel all of us take this problem seriously, and that all of the Nordic countries are actively taking action to deal with the problem. Legal changes are afoot in several countries, and it is clear that #metoo in various ways has made an impression in society, but first and foremost in politics.”

There was a clear will to change, and to seriously getting to the core of the problem: The power structures, acknowledged Anna Söderbäck.



Finnish critics: Unemployed punished for inactivity – regardless of their situation

Finland's activation model for unemployed people was meant to do just that – activate the unemployed. Yet results remain elusive. All unemployed people are critical to the model, say those the NLJ has spoken to.

NEWS

19.04.2018

TEXT: MARCUS FLOMAN, PHOTO CATA PORTIN

The activation model's aim was to shorten unemployed people's periods of being outside of the labour market, plus matching jobseekers with available jobs. Right now, thanks to the economic upturn, there are many jobs to be had in Finland – the problem is that right now there is a poor match between jobs and jobseekers' competencies. It is not clear whether the activation model is the right cure for solving the matching problem.

A new year political storm

Sometimes a political opinion emerges when it really is already too late. That is what happened soon after the Finnish government before Christmas of 2017 introduced the activation model for the unemployed. Soon after that, the debate took off, resulting in a new round of negotiations in parliament.

In a few days, trade unions and the political opposition shook Finland into looking at what the activa-

tion model could mean in the worst case scenario: Unemployed people would be punished economically if they were not sufficiently active – regardless of whether or not they were able to influence their own situation. We will return to the political process' future later on.



But first we visit HeTy – Helsinki Job Channel, a course centre and meeting point that supports and advises the unemployed in Helsinki.

The unemployed are against the model

"All of the unemployed people I talk to are negative to the activation model. This is because the new system punishes anyone who does not meet the new law's criteria – rather than rewarding those who succeed," says Petri who I meet at HeTy cafeteria in Helsinki's South Harbour.

Petri and his friends are not alone in their criticism. All winter long, Finnish newspapers have been filled with letters from unemployed people, opposition politicians and experts on labour market issues. The fact that unemployed people could lose parts of their unemployment benefit because of issues outside of their control has been the source of much irritation.

"Depending on your life situation and where in Finland you live, it is quite simply impossible for everyone to demonstrate their activity. There are not jobs and courses everywhere. I think the public employment and business services should offer a lot more opportunities for the unemployed. This year I have not had a single offer of further education or work. I think this model, which threatens to punish the unemployed, really pacifies people more than it activates them."

The Finnish public employment and business services decide whether you get to take part in employment promoting services – they decide whether the service will improve your chances of finding work. No-one automatically qualifies for employment pro-

moting services. This is decided after testing what is 'useful from a labour political point of view'.

Petri is a volunteer at HeTy, but the new law does not accept voluntary work as sufficiently active work. Recognised activities include paid work, work placements, certain educations and business income – voluntary work is not recognised.

"I really think voluntary work should be recognised as a form of activation. Your employability also improves through voluntary work."

During the lunch break at HeTy I also meet Sara. She tells me that for her entire career she has been working on various short-term contracts. She has been unemployed since the autumn of 2016.

"When this activation model was introduced, I thought I have to do something. I have always been interested in photography, and I managed to find a short-term work placement here at HeTy. I take pictures at different events for the organisation's social media channels. In the longer term I hope to find work in photography," says Sara.



Thanks to her work placement period, Sara will for now avoid the activation model's cuts. Like Petri, she has not met a single unemployed person who is positive to the activation model. She does see one advantage herself.

"I believe I did benefit from the activation model, and my work practice period has allowed me to create new networks. But it is clear that you should be compensated more for demonstrating activity," says Sara.

The public employment and business services have not been given any new tasks since the activation model was implemented.

"Just like before we offer job opportunities and have good routines which we follow. The biggest differ-

ence with the new model is that there is a threat of cuts to payments if you are not active. So this acts as a sort of extra push in order to increase the employment rate,” says Jarmo Ukkonen, head of Uusi-maa public employment and business services.

The fact that the public employment and business services have not been given new resources at the start of the year, in order to offer more support for and meetings with the unemployed for instance, has been highlighted as a sore point in Finland. Compared to Denmark, which also has introduced an activity model, Finnish labour market authorities put fewer resources into actively meeting and seeking out those without jobs.

“All of the courses we offer are fully booked, so to me it looks like the activity among the unemployed is considerably higher now than it used to be. There is also an increase of 24,000 workers in short-term jobs compared to last year – but it is far too early to say whether this has been a result of the activation model or something else,” says Ukkonen.

In mid-April, the Finnish government decided to put aside 11.2 million euro in its spring budget to hire some 200 people to the public employment and business services, so that they to a greater extent can be in contact with the unemployed.

More than half had benefits cut

The Social Insurance Institution of Finland, Kela, which is responsible for paying out unemployment benefits, said in early April 2018 that half of the unemployed on the lowest benefits will lose 4.65 per cent of their support in the next three months. These are preliminary figures from Kela. These people have not demonstrated sufficient activity between January and March 2018.

Most researchers believe it is still too early to draw any main conclusions on whether the activation model works or not. But Pasi Pajula at Kela told Yle that nothing points to the activation model changing any unemployed people’s behaviour. According to Pajula, just under half of the people on unemployment benefits via Kela have been active during the first quarter of this year – that is largely the same number of people who were active one year ago.

“It looks like young people and women are generally more active than older people and men. This was the case before the activation model was introduced, and it seems to still be the case,” Pajula told Yle.

New parliamentary debate

The political storm raging in the new year when the Finnish policy was launched, was created by

long-term unemployed Helsinki citizen Martin-Éric Racine. A few days before Christmas, he wrote the text for an electronic citizen initiative whose aim was to get rid of the law behind the activity model.

If a citizen initiative gathers more than 50,000 signatures, parliament must debate the case. In a little over a week, the initiative reached the parliamentary limit and in March it had 140,000 names. The initiative got some tailwind in social media, mostly via the unemployed’s networks, the major trade organisations and the parliamentary opposition.

When the issue will be discussed in parliament later, the government parties enjoy a slim majority.

Nordic politicians on their guard as the EU's new labour authority takes shape

The European Commission is moving at pace to make the European Pillar of Social Rights a reality. In March it presented what it called a 'Social Fairness Package', where it proposed that the EU should establish a European labour authority to make sure EU rules on issues including the posting of workers and the coordination of social security schemes are being followed.

NEWS

17.04.2018

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG, EDITOR EU & ARBETSRÄTT

Social policy initiatives with a whiff of supranationalism are usually get defensive reactions in the Nordic region. During the deliberations about what would become the European Pillar of Social Rights, it was important to the Nordic countries that this did not contain any binding rules and that it did not increase the EU's competence to pass legislation on issues relating to labour law and other social issues. This should still primarily be the responsibility of the member states.

Moving fast

And that is what happened. The social pillar is just a political declaration which has established principles and common aims for the EU and the member states, without saying anything about how these should become reality or at what pace this should happen.

The European Commission has, however, demonstrated that it is determined this should be carried out at pace. Only a few weeks after the social pillar was adopted at the social summit in Gothenburg in November, the Commission presented a proposal for a directive which contained new minimum rights for employees in the EU (see 'Swedish social partners warn against EU directive on employment conditions').



In addition, the Commission had begun talking about establishing a European labour authority to ensure that EU rules on labour mobility are enforced in a fair, simple and effective way. What did that mean, exactly? Would an EU authority take over tasks which the member states' own supervising authorities – or even the social partners – were responsible for, like in Denmark and Sweden?

Denmark's Minister for Employment Troels Lund Poulsen expressed his misgivings in a letter to Marianne Thyssen, the commissioner responsible. In the first place, he felt there was no need for a new authority to solve existing problems. It was better to keep building on cooperation and mechanisms already in place.

Danish demands

If the Commission does stick to its plans for a European labour authority, three demands must be ful-

filled, according to the government minister. Firstly, the principle of subsidiarity and member states' own authorities must be respected. Secondly, it must leave space for the different labour market models and priorities member states may have. It is for instance crucial that a European labour authority does not encroach on the autonomy of the social partners and the key role that they play.

Thirdly, the authority should not have any supranational competences. It should only concern itself with improving the enforcement of existing rules, wrote Troels Lund Poulsen.

On 13 March the Commission presented its finished proposal on 'the establishing of the European Labour Authority'. So what does the Commission envisage the authority to be doing?

The European labour authority is not meant to replace member states' own supervising authorities, or control them. The aim is to ensure that people who find work in a different country, or who are posted there by their employers, should have their rights, as defined by EU rules, protected. The authority will do this by making it easier for employees and businesses to access information about rights and responsibilities in a certain member state. It should also support member states in their efforts to monitor that rules are being observed, which would include the use of joint inspections.

A third task will be to mediate between member states in the case of disputes over for instance how social security rules should be adapted for an employee who has been working in several countries.

"Cautiously optimistic"

It remains to be seen whether the Danish government believes the proposal fulfils all the demands presented by the Minister for Employment. Sweden's Minister for Employment Ylva Johansson, who shares many of her Danish colleague's concerns, says she is "cautiously optimistic".

She believes the proposal at least does not upset the power balance between the EU and the member states. Whether a new authority is the best solution remains to be seen however, according to Ylva Johansson.

The Minister for Employment does face protests from the centre-right opposition in Sweden's parliament, however. It feels the proposed European labour authority is just another step towards ever-increasing supranationalism when it comes to labour market issues.

The 'Social Fairness Package' presented by the Commission on 13 March also included a proposal that the Council of the European Union adopts a recommendation that member states should improve social protection for workers with precarious employment conditions and the self-employed, and give them the right to unemployment benefits, sick pay and other social security benefits which they cannot access today.



Icelandic companies want to introduce equal pay standard ahead of time

Icelandic companies are hard at work preparing to meet demands introduced in equal pay legislation presented at the start of the year. Several of them want to adapt the equal pay standard before the deadline. But the amount of work is greater than expected, and the first ones out must start from scratch.

NEWS

09.04.2018

TEXT: GUÐRÚN HELGA SIGURDARDÓTTIR, PHOTO: FRÍÐRIK FRÍÐRIKSSON

The CenterHotels chain introduced the equal pay standard as early as last year. 18 companies already have the certification. Head of HR Eir Arnbjargardóttir says the equal pay standard clearly outlines for their 260 staff what is what when it comes to equality and wage issues.

“The legislation means we must do a lot of monitoring, assessments and much work in order to keep the certification. The introduction was more demanding than we realised,” she explains.

When CenterHotels started introducing the standard, there were no consultants who had any experience of the equal pay standard, so the introduction meant the companies had to put a lot of effort into this. Now, more and more companies have gained that experience, and consultants have started offering their services.

The shipping transportation company Eimskip is one of Iceland’s largest companies with more than 1700 staff. Specialist Falasteen Abu Libdeh says Eimskip aims to be one of the first companies to introduce

the equal pay standard in Iceland. But much work remains before that aim has been achieved.



“We decided to go through everything from scratch, map and coordinate the entire company plus our staff, gather information on wages and so on. Right now we are gathering information about all the training we do within the company,” explains Falasteen Abu Libdeh.

Building on the Icelandic experience

Just under 2000 people work for Eimskip across 20 countries. Around half of their staff are in Iceland. The company’s vision for the future is that all wages are equal, including for those who work in other countries.

“But we will finalise the introduction of the equal pay standard in Iceland first, before we start mapping and planning for introducing the standard elsewhere. When we have introduced the standard in Iceland, we can build on that experience,” she says.

The largest companies first

The payment solutions company Valitor also operates in other countries. Some 220 people work in Iceland while 125 people work in Denmark and the UK. The equal pay standard is being introduced in stages, with the largest companies coming on board first.

Since Valitor’s Icelandic workforce only counts 220 people, the company is not legally obliged to introduce the equal pay standard until next year. But the company has chosen to do it already this year.



Randver Fleckenstein is in charge of introducing the equal pay standard for Valitor together with the company’s head of HR. He says Valitor has been preparing for the standard for some time, but was waiting for the final go-ahead from the company’s CEO.

“We have only just began, but believe we can manage to finalise the process within the given time-frame. We think this is a very exciting task and that the company will benefit from the equal pay standard. We are happy and look forward to doing this,” says Randver.

Suspicious disappear

He points out that the equal pay standard also works as a tool for informing the company’s staff and answering their questions, meaning any doubts or suspicions can disappear.

The equal pay standard only applies to companies and staff in Iceland. Valitor also employs staff in Denmark and the UK. The idea is to introduce the standard there too, but it is still not clear when this work can start. Like Eimskip, Valitor wants to gain experience from Iceland first.

“We start working with Valitor abroad when we have finished with Iceland,” says Randver Fleckenstein.

The equal pay standard also leads to new companies being set up.

Offering advice

Since 2013, Gyða Björg Sigurðardóttir has worked with companies which are introducing the equal pay standard. She has now set up her own consultancy firm which offers help with the introduction of the equal pay standard.

She leads a group which will organise visits to companies that have already introduced the standard. She will also organise conferences and meetings where company representatives can learn from each other’s experiences, ask questions and discuss the equal pay standard.