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Editorial: One step forward and two steps back?

Nordic women are loosing power in politics and society, according to Nordic Labour Journal's barometer. Is this really the case? Denmark's Minister for Equality promises a policy in high gear, and the chairman of Carlsberg's executive board is going for 40 percent women on the board, but says no thank you to any legislation in Denmark. Can they achieve a better balance of power, like Iceland has?

COMMENTS

08.03.2012

BERIT KVAM

Denmark has chosen a female prime minster for the first time, but when Finland has chosen men both as president and prime minister not even that improves the balance of power in the Nordic region. One step forward and two steps back, it seems.

Iceland's Prime Minister Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir has managed to change things. She puts it bluntly: Before the economic crisis hit Iceland, society there was governed according to male values. A small elite held power. Now power is more equally divided. "It is sometimes said that things would look different if women had been in power before the crash."

We didn't ask Manu Sareen, Minister for Equality in Denmark as well as in the EU right now, whether he agrees with Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir. But he told Nordic Labour Journal he intends to turbo-charge the work for gender equality both in Denmark and in Europe. He wants to fight violence against women and a gender divided labour market, but he does not want quotas.

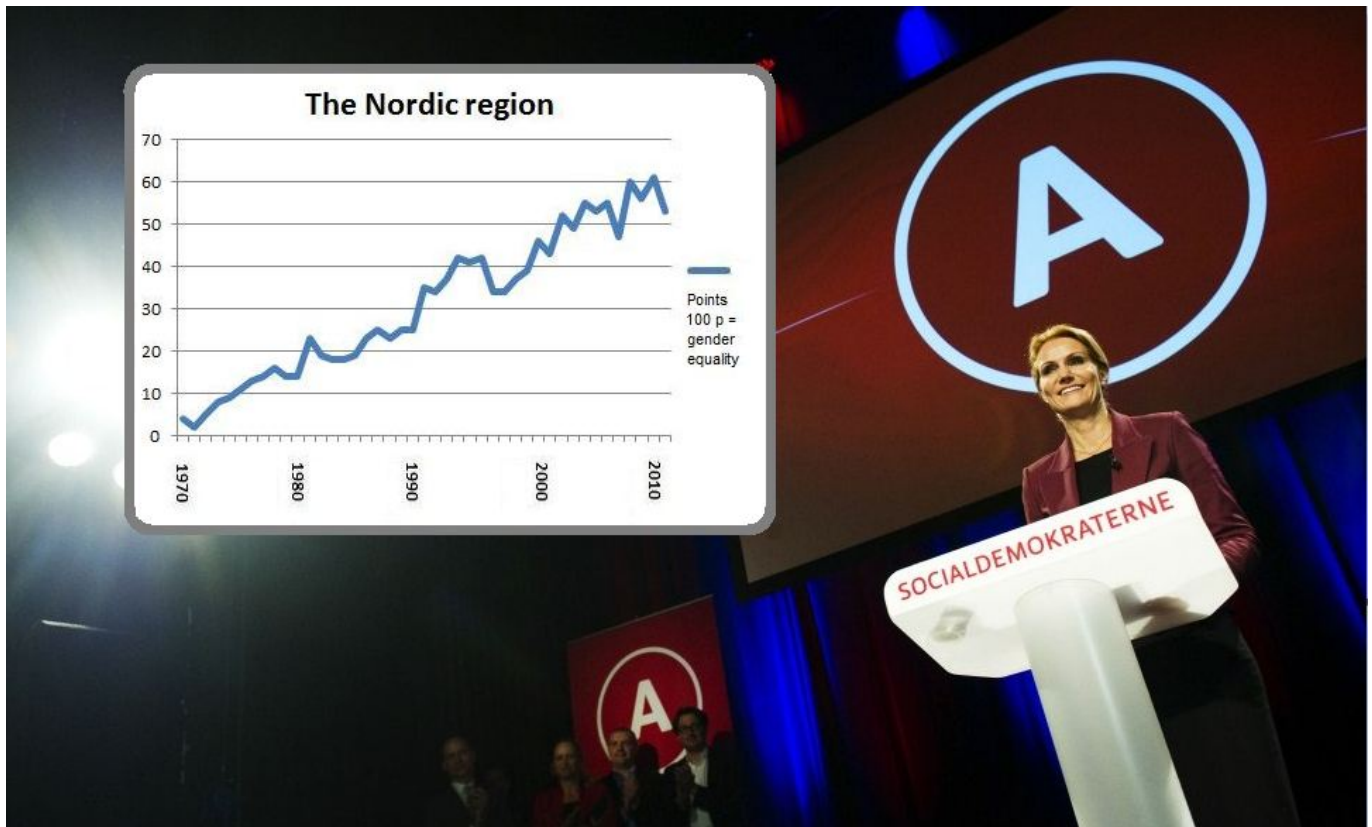
Sweden too focuses on women and the labour market. For many years the government has fought to support, develop and highlight women's entrepreneurship. But it's important to keep an eye on the ball. Our report shows Swedish entrepreneurship risks mirroring the gender segregated labour market.

There's a lively debate on women, power and positions, especially when it comes to board representation in big companies. Only one in ten board members is a woman, says the OECD. EU commissioner Viviane Reding has run out of patience. She will introduce boardroom gender quotas if the companies can't sort it out themselves.

Yet there are some positive developments: the chairman of Carlsberg's executive board, Povl Krogsgaard-Larsen, wants to take the number of women on the board from zero to 40

percent. He is convinced women board members will help the bottom line, and says "any group works best when both sexes are represented". But he strongly opposes legally binding quotas.

Legally binding quotas is what has made Norway an example to follow for many countries. The law on boardroom gender quotas backed by effective sanctions has so far given the best results. "The gender quota law is a resounding success," says our expert. So maybe two steps forward and...



Helle Thorning-Schmidt addressing her party colleagues soon after winning the Danish election. She became Denmark's first female prime minister.

Nordic women lose power despite Denmark's new prime minister

The Nordic Labour Journal's gender barometer shows equality between the sexes in top political and professional positions is falling in the Nordic region. Denmark gaining its first female prime minister with Helle Thorning-Schmidt does not make up for the fact that Finland has just got a male president and a male prime minister.

THEME

08.03.2012

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, FOTO: JONATHAN NACKSTRAND AFP/SCANPIX

The Nordic Labour Journal presents its gender equality barometer for the second year running. It shows which sex has the power in the most important and most symbolic positions within politics and in working life.

We look at 24 positions (see a detailed list in the box on the right) within politics, the social partners and certain symboli-

cally important positions like arch bishop, head of the central bank and commander-in-chief.

We award different points to the various positions. The post of prime minister gets the top score of five points. Each country gets a total of 40 points, or 200 points for the whole of the Nordic region. Gender equality is achieved either if women in

one country get 20 points or when they get 100 points across the Nordic region.

So far Nordic women have not got more than 61 points at the most. In other words - they have not reached more than 61 percent gender equality within the positions of power which we look at. That top was reached in 2011, while this year's figure of 53 represents a fall of eight points.

Finland from top to bottom

Last year Finland was the most gender equal Nordic country, when women got 15 out of 40 points. Since the aim is half of the power, or 20 points, Finnish women had reached 75 percent equality.

This was largely down to the fact that both the president and the prime minister were women last year. On 1 March Tarja Halonen stepped down as president and was replaced by Sauli Niinistö. Mari Kiviniemi's Centre Party was one of the big losers during the Finnish parliamentary elections on 17 April 2011. Because of a drawn-out process ending with a six-party coalition government, Mari Kiviniemi did not step down as prime minister until 22 June. She had then been serving for exactly one year. Jyrki Katainen from the National Coalition Party formed a new government instead. One small comfort is the fact that his government has Finland's first female finance minister, Jutta Urpilainen. But in total Finland fell from 15 to seven points.

Denmark tops our barometer with 14 points, due to Social Democrat Helle Thorning-Schmidt's victory in parliamentary elections there. The country also has a female head of state in Queen Margrethe.

First female arch bishop



There have been no elections in the other Nordic countries, but there have been changes to the allocation of points nonetheless. Norway's head of police Ingelin Killengren has stepped down, after being the only woman in that position so far. But at the same time a new position within the state church has emerged, called preses, which in reality means Norway has got an arch bishop. The first person to hold that post is Helga Haugland Byfuglien, who was made preses on 2 October 2011.

The position of commander-in-chief remains the only position in our survey which has yet to be held by a woman. In Finland the president is the head of defence, so Tarja Halo-

nen has already held that position. We have nevertheless chosen to wait with awarding points to Finland until General Ari Puheloinen, who heads Finland's armed forces, gets a female successor. Iceland has no armed forces, so instead we count their head of the coast guard. Island has very few government ministers, which means the points will differ somewhat there.

Female trade unions bosses

For a short amount of time in 2011 - 12 days - all of Sweden's three major trade unions were led by women. Wanja Lundby-Wedin has been the president of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation since 2007 and Anna Ekström has been leading the Swedish Confederation of Professions since 2001. On 11 May Eva Nordmark took the helm of the Swedish Confederation for Professional Employees (TCO). On 23 May Anna Ekström changed jobs and became the director general of the Swedish National Agency for Education.

If anyone raised an eyebrow over the female dominance within the unions - if nowhere else but in Finland, where a woman has never headed any of the three largest unions - it is a situation which Norwegians got used to many years ago. For six years, starting in 2001 with Gerd-Liv Valla becoming head of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions, all the three main trade unions were run by women, with Randi Bjørgen at the Confederation of Vocational Unions and Christl Kvam at the Federation of Norwegian Professional Associations.

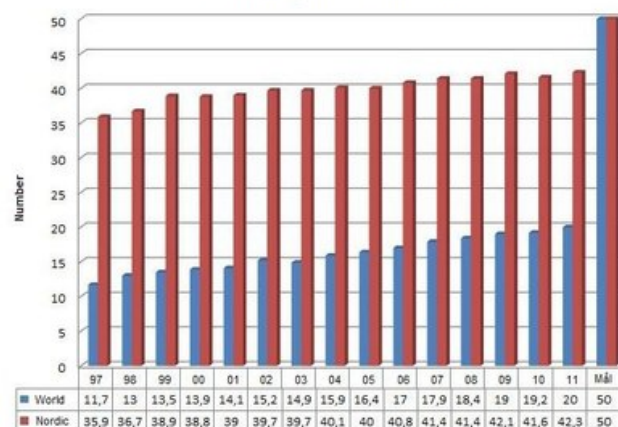
Parliaments still have a way to go

You could argue all female government ministers should be part of our survey, but real power is often concentrated within an inner circle. We have chosen ministries according to those which are cooperating in the Nordic Council of Ministers and according to the committee structures within parliaments.

While there is no clear change of trend in our equality barometer, the reduction in female representatives highlights the fact that it takes time to achieve gender equality. The Nordic countries are leading the pack when it comes to the gender balance in parliaments, with 42 percent women across the region.

15 years ago that number was 36 percent. If this trend continues it will still take another 16 years before there is complete equality between the sexes in the Nordic countries, and 27 years before the rest of the world arrive at today's Nordic level of just above 40 percent women.

Female parliamentarians



The graph shows the percentage of female parliamentarians. The blue pillars represent the world, and the red represent the Nordic region. The pillar on the far right shows the goal of an equal percentage.

Source: www.ipu.org



On Monday 3 October the Minister for Gender Equality, Manu Sareen, cycled with his ministerial colleagues from the party headquarters of the Danish Social-Liberal Party to the Amalienborg palace where the new government was presented

Danish gender equality shifting up a gear

Denmark's new Minister for Gender Equality, Manu Sareen, promises to turbo charge gender equality. His main focus will be to fight violence against women and a gender-divided labour market. He wants more women in top management and into board rooms.

THEME

08.03.2012

TEKST: MARIE PREISLER, FOTO: MARIE HALD AFP/SCANPIX

The Danish government's programme acknowledges that gender equality has decreased in the past few years, and announces a range of initiatives to change this. Minister for Gender Equality, Manu Sareen, intends to put words into action both in Denmark and on the international stage.

"There is no doubt we can do even better in Denmark. We still face a range of challenges which the government wants to address. We have a long list of initiatives which should shift gender equality up a gear in Denmark," he says.

The Minister for Gender Equality has just handed in his annual perspective and action plan for gender equality issues to

parliament. The plan puts a new and offensive gender equality policy on the agenda, he says. It addresses three challenges to equality which the minister feels strongly about:

"There are three things I feel are particularly important. Firstly we will put violence against women on the agenda. Violence against women is a cultural phenomenon, just like prostitution. Our culture makes it OK to visit a prostitute and OK to hit women. This is clearly something which I want to change. Secondly it is important to get more women into management positions and more women into board rooms."

The third problem which the minister would very much like to do something about is the obstacles which prevent equality between the sexes.

“On the face of it we are very equal, but many invisible obstacles still remain. One thing I want to do is to change the gender-divisions within the labour market, which is a result of a very gender-based choice of education.”

Bottom in the Nordic region

He feels Denmark is well advanced when it comes to gender equality.

“This becomes quite obvious when you hear about women around the world who lack basic rights and who are far off enjoying anything remotely like the gender equality we have here at home.”

Yet he also acknowledges the fact that in a Nordic setting, the situation for Danish women is not all that great. Denmark is bottom among the Nordic countries when it comes to the number of women represented in top management and on company boards. Denmark also has the lowest number of independent female entrepreneurs in the Nordic region and a lower number than in the EU in general. The minister expects that the government’s promised maternity compensation fund for the self employed will change this. He thinks this will see more women dare start up by themselves.

The minister is also keen to get more women into board rooms - both in Denmark and elsewhere in the EU.

“It is simply a waste of good resources when so few of the skilled and well-educated women we have in Denmark are allowed to bring their qualifications to the board room. Everyone should have the opportunity to be part of shaping the society we live in, so it is important to have equal access to society’s more powerful positions.”

Silent on quotas

For now, however, he will not be drawn on whether he wants to introduce legally binding quotas on the number of women on company boards, akin to what has happened in Norway:

“We have said that we will consider gender quotas. We are working on this. At the same time we are looking at other models for how to secure more women on company boards. I have been talking to other EU countries to see how they approach this challenge. We are currently looking for a model which will suit Denmark.”

Last year the EU commissioner for equality, Viviane Reding, told European companies they had one year to increase the number of women on company boards voluntarily. Hardly any companies have done this. That is why Viviane Reding has announced a change to EU legislation. Several media have said she is close to proposing EU regulation which

would impose a 30 percent female boardroom quota by 2015. Manu Sareen does not want to comment.

“It is important to get this problem on the agenda and I can only support the commissioner’s choice to focus on this. I cannot comment at this stage on what the Commission is planning to propose.”

While the Danish government does not want to be drawn on the issue of quotas, it is keen to pass legislation on compulsory paternal leave. The government wants to earmark up to three months of parental leave for the father. Manu Sareen does not think this constitutes too much interference into how families choose:

“I am sure this will have a snowball effect on many other things. We want to create a new mindset where we don’t automatically presume that mothers are better parents than fathers.”

A global agenda

Manu Sareen works hard to put gender equality high on the European and global agenda during Denmark’s EU presidency. He has just been representing the EU at the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women in New York.

He welcomes the fact that Norway’s chairmanship at the Nordic Council of Ministers also puts gender equality on the agenda:

“It pleases me to see that Norway’s chairmanship is following up the Danish chairmanship’s pan-Nordic mapping of men in healthcare occupations. Norway also focuses on the two cross-sector priorities in the cooperation programme: the integration of a gender and equality perspective (gender mainstreaming) and the active participation of men and boys. These are important focus areas and I will be following this work closely.”

Equal opportunities

The Danish government minister sees formal gender equality as a step in the right direction. What really counts is to secure equal opportunities for both sexes.

“Formal equality means women and men enjoy the same rights and are equal in the face of law. In Denmark we have already achieved this. But that does not mean that women and men in reality enjoy equal opportunities. For instance, there is not equal access to management positions and seats on company boards. This shows us we still face certain obstacles which we need to overcome before we achieve real equality.”

The most important obstacle to equal opportunities for men and women, says Manu Sareen, are society’s norms which prevent the individual’s free development and choice of education and job.

“Girls are often not expected to be interested in technology and IT, while boys are expected to be less calm and less interested in studying. This limits the individual’s free choice. And it means that we don’t get to use all the good resources which could benefit the whole of society. We will challenge these norms,” he says.



Brewing giant Carlsberg takes the lead on gender equality among Danish businesses by introducing a female quota to their board

More women rise to the top at Carlsberg

It's looking bad for gender equality in Danish companies' boardrooms and management. There is massive opposition to legally binding female quotas. Now one of Danish business' old giants is taking voluntary action: from 2015 at least 40 percent of the elected members to the board of Carlsberg brewery will be women.

THEME

08.03.2012

TEKST: MARIE PREISLER, FOTO: CARLSBERG

With this the company takes the lead when it comes to voluntarily introducing quotas for the number of women on company boards. Carlsberg is also drawing up action plans to secure more women in company management.

"The company's nomination committee has long been debating how to achieve a more diverse company board with broader competence. That is why we have now chosen to appoint two women to the board and to work towards getting a further two women on the board by 2015 at the latest," Povl Krogsgaard-Larsen tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

New guidelines

Carlsberg's board has just informed the Copenhagen stock exchange that they have agreed aims for gender and international experience for the group's board. This means that by the end of 2015 there should be at least 40 percent women among the board members who are elected during the company's general assembly. Today the board has no women members.

The company will also work towards increasing the number of women in management, and another future goal is that at

least half of the board members elected during the general assembly will have considerable international experience from leading larger companies or institutions.

Chairman of the executive board of the Carlsberg Foundation, Povl Krogsgaard-Larsen, is convinced that women on the board will improve the bottom line:

“We are a so-called ‘fast moving consumer goods’ company, and half of the world’s consumers are women. So it makes sense that women take part when we decide the future development of Carlsberg. I am also convinced and it is my personal experience that any group works best when both sexes are represented,” he says.

No legally binding quotas

Carlsberg’s chairman of the executive board is against legally binding quotas, like the Norwegian model, however. He is in line with the majority of Danish businesses on this:

“I very much welcome more women into the board rooms, but I will oppose any legally binding quotas. It’s important for the women’s own sake that they are included on the board because they are worth it - not because the companies are obliged to have women on their boards. All board members make mistakes, me included. A woman will also do that, and when that happens it would be easy for someone to say that she made the mistake because she was not equally qualified. That would be incredibly uncomfortable,” says Povl Krogsgaard-Larsen.

Women make up only 12 percent of Danish company boards. If you don’t count the employee representatives, the number of women on Danish company boards fall to a mere six percent. That is less than in any other Nordic country.

A suggested compromise

Both Denmark’s government and the EU Commission say the voluntary inclusion of women on company boards is happening too slowly, and Povl Krogsgaard-Larsen agrees. He suggests a solution which could speed things up without entering into a legally binding deal:

“Things are happening under the surface in many businesses, but I agree that things aren’t moving fast enough. So my compromise suggestion is for boards to be forced to establish a nomination committee which must discuss how to achieve board room diversity - including a sensible gender division. This would secure a debate on gender and I am convinced most company boards would arrive at the conclusion that it is in their own interest to include women.”

There is strong political will in Sweden to strengthen women's entrepreneurship and between 2007 and 2014 the centre-right government spent a total of 800m SEK (€90m) on supporting, developing and highlighting women's enterprise. De-regulated public sector markets open up for new businesses, but there is a risk that Swedish businesses will mirror the Swedish labour market and end up being just as gender segregated.

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN, ILLUSTRATION LENA EKLUND (CROPPED)

"If you create new markets within areas where women have been active, you get more women entrepreneurs. But you further gender segregation too, and you risk going from a low-pay occupation to a low-profit company. This means we're not thinking new and I feel this is a big problem," says Eva

Between 2008 and 2011, 19 researchers have been studying a range of aspects of female entrepreneurship. They started by addressing the question ‘What is the problem with women entrepreneurs?’ from a range of different angles and knowledge areas. What does a woman entrepreneur really look like? What makes women start a company? Can you really compare Swedish female entrepreneurs to those in the USA?

What stimulates women entrepreneurs and which impact can various political initiatives have? The book does not come up with any simple answers, not even to its own basic question - is female entrepreneurship a goal or a means to an end? Is this about gender equality or growth?

"It's all very ambiguous. We run a risk of creating a problem around women's entrepreneurship when this in reality is about the male structures present in many of society's sectors, for instance within universities and colleges," says Eva Blomberg.

Great political interest

Female entrepreneurship has created great political interest over the past 20 years and is now on the agenda of most European countries. It was also one of two themes up for debate during the Northern Future Forum in Stockholm in February, where the leaders for nine Nordic and Baltic countries plus the UK met. The motivation for getting more women to become entrepreneurs is that women's business ideas should be nurtured in order to increase growth and improve competitiveness.

During the last and the present parliamentary term, Sweden's centre-right government has spent 100m SEK (€11m) every year to improve the conditions for female entrepreneurs. The government has also asked Statistics Sweden to create more gender-specific statistics and parliament has passed several resolutions to improve employers' security - for instance when it comes to unemployment insurance and health insurance.

As early as in 2006, when the government decided to specifically back women entrepreneurs, statistics for 2005 showed that Sweden, followed by Denmark and Norway, had the lowest number of entrepreneurs among working women in the 25 EU countries and Norway. The same list showed that Finland had considerably more self-employed women. But this has not always been the case. Swedish women have historically been active entrepreneurs. Many ran their own companies within the textile industry, they have been running corner shops. But structural changes in many industries affected many trades - not least those run by women. The textile industry flagged out and corner shops have been pushed out by big supermarket chains.

"The areas where women were trailblazers have lost out to the competition," concludes Eva Blomberg.

Structural obstacles

These are the things the current political drive is aiming to change. The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, which is responsible for most of the money politicians are spending on this, works on a range of activities aimed at helping existing businesses, supporting new ideas and making women entrepreneurs more visible.

"Women are just as active as men in working life, so is it OK that 25 percent of businesses are run by women and 75 percent by men? Women manage brilliantly as entrepreneurs, but the structures around us need to become more supportive. There are perceptions about what a business is, and they often do not fit with what female entrepreneurship means," says Gunilla Thorstensson, director of activities since the beginning in 2007.

The programme 'Promoting women's entrepreneurship' mainly focuses on three things. One is to provide support for women who are running and developing businesses. Business development is one important support.

"Women often end up inside a business model where it is very difficult to grow, but by supporting business development you can give them new tools. I have heard participants at our business development programmes say 'if I hadn't been given this I would have closed my company down'," says Gunilla Thorstensson.

Long-term effects

The two other focus areas look at ways to make it easier for women to start and run their own businesses and to showcase women who run businesses successfully. Nearly 900 women are ambassadors for women entrepreneurs and visit schools to talk about what it is like to run a company. There are also activities at universities and colleges aimed at making women in higher education more interested in starting their own business even before they have finished their studies.

140,000 people took advantage of the programme during the first period, i.e. between 2007 and 2010, according to the Agency for Economic and Regional Growth's own figures. 27,000 women have taken part in business development training and 31,300 women at universities and in colleges have developed their entrepreneurship and also started 540 new businesses. The ambassadors for women entrepreneurs are estimated to have met more than 82,000 people. Yet Gunilla Thorstensson underlines that women's entrepreneurship is a complex issue which is influenced by many structures and different conditions.

"It's about behaviour, attitudes and perceptions, and that means we cannot simply push a button. It takes time and the results of our labour could show up at a much later stage," says Gunilla Thorstensson.

The challenge now is to get strategies in place by the programme's end in 2014 allowing women to take part in business promoting efforts on equal terms with men, for instance through business incubators, state capital for businesses, guidance and business development programmes. Today this sort of help is far too much targeted at trades which are dominated by men, according to Gunilla Thorstensson.

Individualised equality

The complicated nature of women's entrepreneurship is also supported by the research presented in the book 'Female entrepreneurship - a goal or a means to an end?' It shows how 20 years of policies aimed at improving conditions for women entrepreneurs rarely have given the desired results. It is simply impossible to determine whether new businesses have been created as a result of the measures which have been put in place. The book also analyses of the claim that Sweden is doing so much worse on women entrepreneurship than the USA, the country which is often held up as the good example. Many of the businesses created there are set up by poor women who cannot afford child care in any other way. Many of the businesses which are created there have a short lifespan. In the Nordic countries with their strong welfare states women have not been forced to start companies because old ones have gone out of business. The research also shows that women with small children prefer the safety of permanent jobs.

Great political hope has been put on the privatisation of the public sector, with the belief that this would create an arena where women's inventiveness and ideas would come to fruition. Yet experience shows the visions have not been fulfilled. Small businesses started by women have found it hard to compete with larger ones within the same trade.

"As a result of public sector privatisation, women have become potential entrepreneurs. This is not a problem for those who want to start a business, but for those who are forced into starting one it is a problem. If they become self-employed, what growth have they created? They are simply doing the same work with less job security. They even risk earning even less than before. This is something that should be debated on a political level," says Eva Blomberg.

She says women contribute to the social economy regardless of whether they are employed or run a business. Growth is mainly achieved when a business starts employing people. It is hard to say whether or not it is a good thing to gender-identify businesses by helping out women entrepreneurs in particular. It is a positive thing to highlight women's role in the national economy. The downside is that you risk individualising a problem when in reality it is based on existing structures which today favour men.

"Gender equality has been limited to an individual level and this is a development which has positive and negative sides to it. It is all very ambiguous, but there is a risk that failure as an entrepreneur becomes nobody's fault but your own," says Eva Blomberg.

Effective sanctions make Norway's quota law a success

The law on quotas is the most efficient measure to improve the boardroom gender balance. "But the law should be followed up by effective sanctions and state measures which help stimulate the action." That is the advice from head of research Mari Teigen to other countries looking to legislate for quotas on company boards.

THEME

08.03.2012

TEXT: BERIT KVAM

There is a lot of attention on how to improve the gender balance in Europe's social and working life, and the debate about company boards is particularly active. Norway reigns supreme with 40 percent female board room representation in the country's largest companies. That is twice the number for Sweden, which comes second, closely followed by France, according to a fresh OECD report. On average within the OECD area only one in ten board members in large companies is a woman.

'Women on boards in Europe: From a Snail's Pace to a Giant Leap?' is the title of the EWL's (European Women's Lobby) Report on Progress, Gaps and Good Practice. The February 2012 report shows the progress on boardroom gender balance in nine EU countries and Norway. The report has eight evidence-based conclusions which the EWL suggests could be used to tailor future efforts on EU and domestic levels.

Some of the report's recommendations are: it is necessary to intervene in order to increase the number of women in boardrooms, self-regulation can create a basis for legislation and quotas are most effective when followed up by sanctions. The authors use Norway's introduction of a quota law as an example, and the fact that the aim was not reached until real sanctions were linked to the law.

Self-regulation not enough

Norway's parliament passed the law on quotas in 2003, which says a minimum of 40 percent of either sex must be represented on the boards of a wide range of Norwegian companies. Until 2005 the companies were left to regulate this themselves, but when the number of women did not reach more than 12 percent - far off the 40 percent target - the law was implemented and it reached its full force from 2008. At the same time strict sanctions were introduced for those

companies that failed to follow the law. Those that didn't risked being dissolved.

The law covers nearly 2,000 companies, including some 350 public limited companies, publicly held companies and co-operatives. Before the law was fully implemented some public limited companies re-registered and avoided being covered by the law. This was interpreted as a protest against the process. According to the researcher this could be the case for some, but far from for all.

"The Norwegian law on boardroom quotas has been a gigantic success," says Mari Teigen, research director at the Institute for Social Research in Oslo.

"It shows the will to act in an area which was in complete stagnation. The reality on the ground now shows us that women can have powerful corporate positions," she says, and continues:

"The reason for this success could be that it turned out not to be so difficult to find women to fill the boardroom seats. It could also have presented some companies with the opportunity to replace some board members.

Lively international debate

Norway's quota law had a serious impact on the debate on unreasonable gender gaps in corporate life, while the right tools were missing. When the law came into force it turned out the tools were available.

Similar legislation has since been passed in Spain (2007), Iceland (2010), France (2011), the Netherlands (2011), Belgium (2011) and in Italy (2011). Meanwhile the debate on alternative strategies to improve the gender balance has continued. After much debate, Sweden, for instance, chose an alternative strategy with no legal framework.

The increasing international debate could be linked to the fact that we now, perhaps more than ever before, recognise the power of the free market, says Mari Teigen. Who controls the big companies has become a political issue.

Domino effects

One of the ambitions of the Norwegian law on boardroom quotas was that it should create a domino effect and have an impact outside of the boardrooms too. To which extent has this happened?

“We’re in 2012 now. The law was fully implemented from 2008. This might not have been enough time to change the top management in the big companies. So we still don’t know what effect the law has had on gender equality. We don’t know enough about whether female board members have been interested in pushing for changes which are more tailored to family and working life, and we know little about whether this has had an impact on companies’ internal equality policies. What we do know is that it has not changed the gender mix in management. CEOs and other top management remain male dominated,” says Mari Teigen.

She points out that Scandinavian top management has been more male dominated than top management in British or US companies for instance. This could be linked to the fact that certain aspects of our welfare state is not conducive to gender equality, thinks Mari Teigen.

“A large public sector could be attracting many women. Career women often find better working conditions in the public sector, which makes it possible to pursue ambitions without compromising Nordic norms on the balance between work and family life. In other countries there might be clearer divisions as women either chose a career or they do not.”

Yet one important reason for male-dominated top management, she thinks, is the fact that male-dominance breeds male-dominance; men prefer men and such expectations become the prevalent culture.

A policy for businesses

There were two important issues behind the introduction of Norway’s quota law. The 1990’s saw a lively debate about the lack of female leaders, and the male dominance in economical decision-making sharply contrasted with the general developments on gender equality. Gender quotas did not represent something new in Norway either. And finally, there was deregulation of public companies. This meant gender balance regulation in public administration and committees was in danger of losing importance. All in all these debates created a starting point for the law on boardroom quotas.

“Politicians developed a policy for businesses. There is still no gender equality policy for businesses apart from the rules on quotas, says Mari Teigen.

How have the social partners contributed to all this?

“When it comes to the social partners, the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise, NHO, has played the most interesting role. NHO has insisted on operating independently and has in principle been against the law. At the same time NHO contributed to the implementation of the law through the Female Future programme, which has helped qualify, highlight and realise female boardroom candidates,” says Mari Teigen.

She is holding a brand new edition of Social Research, Volume 29: ‘Firms, Boards and Gender Quotas – Comparative Perspectives’, which she herself has contributed to with the chapter on ‘Gender Quotas on corporate Boards: On the Diffusion of a Distinct National Policy Reform’.



Viviane Reding is the EU commissioner for justice, fundamental rights and citizenship

Demand for more female board members as EU's patience runs out

EU Commissioner Viviane Reding's patience has ran out. European companies have failed to improve board room gender equality to a satisfactory degree. The European parliament has already voted to introduce quotas to secure at least 30 percent women board members by 2015 and 40 percent by 2020.

THEME

08.03.2012

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: EU

One year ago Viviane Reding asked European companies to promise they would work towards getting at least 40 percent women on their boards. Only 24 companies followed her call, among them cosmetics company Guerlain and luxury goods group LVMH. The rest of the list is less impressive; a Bulgarian export company, Greek fish importer Kallimanis and Spanish business school EADA are hardly European business heavyweights.

40 years to achieve gender equality

There has been no breakthrough for women in 2011.

- A 1.9 percent increase from 2010 means that still only one in seven board members at Europe's top firms is a woman. At this rate, it would take more than 40 years to reach a significant gender balance - at least 40 percent of both sexes, says Viviane Reding.

The number of women board room representatives in larger public companies in the EU is only 13.7 percent.

The European Parliament has already decided quotas should be introduced. All that's needed now is an EU directive. This also means the initiative for improving the gender balance moves from the Nordic region - where Norway already introduced its 40 percent rule in 2008 - to the EU.

Yet since Denmark holds the EU Presidency during the first half of 2012 that country will play a key role in driving the process forward. When EU labour and equality ministers met on 17 February the issue of quotas created the basis for a lively debate.

"I am really happy that the meeting agreed the underrepresentation of women in board rooms is a problem. Everybody thinks this is a challenge we must find a solution to," said Danish Minister for Gender Equality, Manu Sareen, after the meeting.

Viviane Reding told a post-meeting press conference the most important reason to get more women into board rooms was the clear link between profitability and female representation. She quoted an Ernst and Young survey of Europe's 290 largest public companies, which showed those with at least one female board member were significantly more profitable than those with no female representation.

"Women mean business"

"Women in top management really mean business. There is no longer anyone challenging these facts. I have seen an evolution of the public debate. One year ago, many companies were still saying that you can't find women for top jobs and that increasing women's participation is not an issue," said Viviane Reding.

"Now no one says this. There is an awareness that women mean business and this is big progress."

When Viviane Reding presented the latest figures for European female board room representation on the 5th of March, she also invited the public – individual businesses, social partners, interested NGOs and citizens – to comment on what kind of measures the EU should take to tackle the lack of gender diversity in boardrooms. The public consultation will run until 28 May 2012. Following this input, the Commission will take a decision on further action later this year.

One option is to use a new political tool brought in with the Lisbon Treaty. Article 19 of the treaty on the functioning of the EU says the Council, after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament, and 'acting unanimously' may 'take appropriate action to combat discrimination based on sex.'

The crucial word here is "unanimously" which limits what the Commission can do. Several member states are against quotas.

The EU Commission and Parliament cannot demand the harmonisation of individual member states' legislation, but it may 'adopt the basic principles of Union incentive measures'.

One such incentive measure could be to draw up a directive which would immediately be implemented in all 27 member states. In that case all countries would have to implement the regulations through their own laws or through collective agreements.

One reason why the Norwegian quota law has been so successful is the fact that it is backed up by real power. Companies which fail to meet the quotas are forcibly dissolved because they no longer fulfill the criteria for being a limited company.

Wide support for early retirement and flexjob reform

There's an increased drive in Denmark to stop young people ending up in benefit traps. Meanwhile there are cuts in subsidies to the flexjob scheme and early retirement.

NEWS

08.03.2012

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER

The Social Democrat-led Danish government has tabled its first major labour market reform, with a suggested 1.4bn DKK (€188m) investment in interdisciplinary rehabilitation teams in all municipalities. These will work to stop young people with few resources from ending up in early retirement. At the same time the reform includes cuts to public spending on early retirement and to the flexjob scheme, amounting to annual savings of 1.9bn DKK (€255m).

Soon after presenting its reform, the government started negotiations with the political parties to secure parliamentary support. Early reaction from the opposition, trade unions and the Confederation of Danish Industry indicates a wide agreement could be achieved.

The Danish Association of Social Workers has also praised the proposal from Minister for Social Affairs Karen Hækkerup (Social Democrats) and Minister of Employment Mette Frederiksen (Social Democrats). Yet there is criticism from trade unions and handicap organisations of the plans for cuts to people in flexjobs.

The reform is really breaking new ground with the so-called rehab-teams in all municipalities. They will work across administrations and - the government promises - without 'silo thinking' on how to reduce the number of vulnerable young people who fall outside of the labour market by being granted early retirement at an early age.

The reform also means the government is now more likely to allow municipalities to keep their responsibility for employment services. So far trade unions and the Social Democrats have wanted to move this responsibility from municipalities back to unemployment benefit funds, who did have the responsibility before the municipal reform.

Unemployment can be defined away

The definition of employment and unemployment differs from country to country. A comparative historical perspective shows the political context - how the problem is presented and how its constituent parts change - steers our understanding. The standard views of employment are no longer relevant in countries like the US or France, according to social historian Noel Whiteside.

RESEARCH

08.03.2012

TEXT: CARL-GUSTAV LINDÉN

“The UK has for instance thrown its hands in the air and declared it no longer believes in *standard employment*. Any employment at all is called employment,” says Whiteside, who works at the University of Warwick.

In the transition to a deregulated labour market with people who are expected to employ themselves or be content with part time work and short contracts, unemployment has been defined away. In its place you find a system where low wages are subsidised through tax breaks.

No common view

In the British context unemployment has been seen almost as a threat against industrial competitiveness, while in France it has become a political threat because it creates syndicalism and protest marches in the streets of Paris.

The common denominator is that all adults are expected to be active in the labour market, but that's where the normative agreement ends. The question is how long should a working life last, from 18 to 64 or from 14 to 67? Should the working week be 4.5 or 6 days and how long should a working day last? How do you control the labour market - will people be allowed to act on their own or are they subordinated the system? Who's responsible for further education?

“And what does early retirement mean, for instance? More than half of all French men over 55 are retired.”

Whiteside presents her views during a seminar at the University of Helsinki where Nordic researchers have gathered to discuss how to define unemployment. The seminar is part of a cooperation financed by NordForsk in the framework of the Nordic Centre of Excellence NordWel: The Nordic Welfare State - Historical Foundations and Future Challenges.

The cutting edge research unit NordWel consists of research groups from eight Nordic universities and is administered by

the Section of Social Science History at the Department of Political and Economic Studies at the University of Helsinki. Nordic Labour Journal reported from their opening seminar in 2007. Pauli Kettunen, professor of political history and head of the network, is now entering the project's sixth and final year.

Critical to new thinking

The historical perspective is very much present in the five theme groups which make up the network, and Kettunen says the researchers have found common ground through their critical approach to the tendency that social policies must be motivated by making economic sense. It is important to recognise social policies' positive economic consequences, but there is often a hidden agenda of reshaping social policies to become a means to achieve economic goals.

“There is a lot of talk about social investments and that means you're economising the motivations for welfare. In EU language there is talk about social policy as a productive factor.”

Many who do research on the Nordic welfare model - i.e. social safety and services, social patterns and shared normative value systems in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden - retain a long-term perspective. There are two different ways of discussing the model: in an historic context where the model is subject to challenges or the exit from the Nordic model as an answer to these challenges - economic competitiveness, social cohesion and shared risks.

“Very few criticise the Nordic model today. We're talking more about differences in how it is being perceived.”

Focus on the welfare state

During Norway's chairmanship of the Nordic Council of Ministers the welfare state is in focus.

Kettunen is keeping a critical eye on the Swedish Social Democrat's attempts at linking the welfare model to their own brand by hanging on to the ownership of its development, despite the fact that it grew out of social and political conditions and through conflicts and compromises between political groups.

"In Finland the welfare state has become a national political project. Powers that were not at all in favour of the welfare state before have now integrated it. The nostalgic welfare nationalism can be seen in Sannfinländarna (the "True Finns") and in the other Nordic populist parties."

The notion of welfare is being interpreted differently in different countries, even if researchers internationally agree on the definition. A book aimed at the American market is soon ready for publication within the framework of NordWel. 'An American Dilemma? Race, ethnicity and welfare in the US and Europe' looks at the different ways of thinking in Europe and the USA by carrying on from Gunnar Myrdal's famous book on the 'negro question'.

A different interpretation of welfare

"In the US welfare has connotations to young, black mothers living in poverty off *welfare*", says Kettunen, and points to the Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's allegation that Obama is promoting a European welfare state while he himself wants the individual American dream. US politicians, in other words, associate welfare with dependency while in Europe we see it as a way of creating opportunities for individual independence within working life or within the family. Another anthology on the Nordic model has been published in Chinese and there is a current series of Sino-Nordic seminars on welfare and labour market policies. Chinese doctoral students are also participating in a summer school run by NordWel this year in cooperation with REASSESS, the other Nordic cutting edge research unit on welfare research.

There are now plans for different exit strategies for NordForsk's NCoE Programme on Welfare Research which has been financing NordWel and REASSESS. Certain cooperation channels should be maintained.

Better than expected

"This has gone better than I'd expected and a lot of things have emerged which we find valuable, for instance when it comes to the education of researchers. Our annual international summer schools for doctoral students is one example of the activities for the education of researchers which we would like to see continue. Others include the younger researchers' own network WelMi (Welfare and Migration)."

The big differences between the Nordic countries' research education has created practical problems for doctoral students who want to be mobile.

Finland offers several types of financing but there are also doctoral students who do not manage to secure any financing. This means Finish doctoral students are more interested in being mobile compared to for instance their Norwegian fellow students.

The international mobility of guest lecturers, postdoc researchers and doctoral students has in any case represented a very successful and central part of NordWel's work.



Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir: The gender pay gap is now the most important equality issue

Iceland's Prime Minister Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir has managed what many thought near impossible. She has cut public spending in the wake of the market crash without negatively impacting Iceland's social security system.

PORTRAIT

08.03.2012

TEXT: GUÐRÚN HELGA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR, PHOTO: GUNNAR V. ANDRÉSSON

Today Iceland enjoys an economic growth of 2.5 to 3.5 percent. The European average is 0.5 percent. Prime Minister Sigurðardóttir is happy that Iceland has achieved such good economic results. The government has also succeeded on other fronts, notably on gender equality, she says.

Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir believes Iceland's pre-economic crisis society was run according to male considerations. Power

was held by only a small elite. The government has worked to change the old power structure in order to create fairer power sharing. This has mainly been done by giving more women access to power.

"It is sometimes said that things would look different if women had been in power before the crash.

“Women don’t take as many risks as men and are guided by other considerations. I think this can impact on leadership,” she says.

Prime Minister Sigurðardóttir points out that the government’s goal has been that at least half of the ministers should be women. And it has succeeded. The majority of the government posts are held by women. Department and parliamentary committees too boast 40 percent women members.

“We will soon achieve what Norway did a few years ago, which is 40 percent of all company board members being women,” says Prime Minister Sigurðardóttir.

Two-year adjustment

The government has earlier encouraged businesses to appoint women to managerial and other powerful posts. This has been slow work, however, says Prime Minister Sigurðardóttir. As a result, Iceland’s government has been forced to legislate in order to achieve gender equality on company boards, just like Norway did. The law says no more than 60 percent of company board members can be men and women should make up at least 40 percent of the board. It comes into force in 2013 when companies and pension funds must have at least 40 percent of either sex on their boards.

Prime Minister Sigurðardóttir points out that during Norway’s two-year adjustment period the number of female board members rose from less than 10 percent to nearly 32 percent, but so far this has not been the case in Iceland.

“I am sure the new law will give us an equally good result, even though the transitional period has not provided us with the same quick result as seen in Norway,” she says.

Iceland’s government works on a four-year equality plan led by the Minister for Social Security. The government has also established a ministerial committee which will lead the government’s work on gender equality. It comprises the Minister for Social Security, the Minister for Finance, the Minister of the Interior and the Prime Minister.

Prime Minister Sigurðardóttir says the committee’s work will highlight the importance of the equality policy. The four government ministers already work with important issues such as human rights, prostitution and trafficking. Results have already been seen in the work to prevent and fight sexual violence and sexual assault.

“We address these issues on the committee,” she says, and adds that Iceland now has a law banning the purchase of sex similar to the Swedish one.

But what is your most important task right now?

The Prime Minister doesn’t hesitate before answering:

“To fight the pay gap between men and women. The government has a project plan to achieve total wage equality.”

"The pay gap breaks my heart"

The government aims to develop a certification standard to achieve equal pay for equal work. Companies can use the standard and they will be awarded a certificate if they can prove that they are following the standard, paying equal wages for equal work. Sigurðardóttir hopes the certificate standard will become a sought-after tool for individual companies.

“Achieving equal pay for equal work is taking so long it breaks my heart,” says Prime Minister Sigurðardóttir.

“But we keep working and we will further our wage policy through our project plan.”

The public sector will head this development. Prime Minister Sigurðardóttir has so far been disappointed with the large pay gaps within the white-collar sector. Public institution management has a certain freedom to influence local wage moderation but often fails to take into account pay gaps between the sexes when money is being divided up.

“The pay gap between men and women has grown, and we will now take this seriously,” she says.

The Icelandic Prime Minister has high hopes for the certification system. She thinks it will help private businesses and the public sector to focus their work on questions of equality.

Snail-speed progress

Prime Minister Sigurðardóttir is impatient and expects quick results. She is worried because the government has still not managed to achieve the desired result without the process now being forced forward.

“Changes to gender equality happens at snail-speed,” she says.

Iceland has changed its legislation on parental leave to allow men to take paternal leave without losing out economically. Before the current legislation came into force only a small percentage of fathers took parental leave. Today between 80 and 90 percent of all fathers do.

She believes parental leave is the single most important step forward for Iceland’s gender equality policies in recent years.

“The system means fathers lose their right to take leave if they don’t take a full three month parental leave. Fathers’ rights to parental leave cannot be transferred to the mothers,” she explains.

Parental leave has been reduced during the crisis. The government has been forced to make cuts by introducing a ceiling to parental leave compensation. But Prime Minister Sigurðardóttir says it is important to increase the compensation again as soon as possible.

“Now that our economy is on its way back up we will soon have the chance to increase the compensation for fathers and mothers on parental leave. This is high up on my list of priorities,” she says.

Iceland’s EU membership application is being processed by the EU right now, under the auspices of the Danish presidency. Prime Minister Sigurðardóttir had expected that important questions for Iceland, like fisheries and agriculture, would be negotiated during Denmark’s presidency. But the chances for that happening are slim as the presidency comes to an end this summer.

She has just met Denmark’s Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt, who heads Denmark’s current EU presidency.

“I am not sure we will manage to look at fisheries and agriculture in time.”

The two female prime ministers had fruitful talks during their meeting in Copenhagen. They discussed general EU issues but also the block’s economic challenges.

“We discussed Iceland’s application too, of course. I presented my views and she presented her opinions on the issue,” says Prime Minister Sigurðardóttir. She also adds that Iceland has met a great deal of good will from both the Danish people and from the other European countries.