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National experiences on gender equality

OSCE assembly, Oslo 8. July 2010

I will start by referring to an article in the New York Times from Sunday 27. June this year. The article is about Swedish fathers, but it also applies to Norwegian reality, and the headline is as follows:

“The masculinity of the Future
A social transformation that mixes manliness with diaper changes.”

I'll read to you parts of the article:

Mikal Karlsson owns a snowmobile, two hunting dogs and five guns. In his spare time, this soldier-turned-game warden shoots moose and trades potty-training tips with other fathers. Cradling 2-month-old Siri in his arms, he can't imagine not taking baby leave. “Everyone does.”

From trendy central Stockholm to this village in the rugged forest south of the Arctic Circle, 85 percent of Swedish fathers take parental leave. In Norway the number is 98 %. Those who don't, face questions from family, friends and colleagues. As other countries still tinker with maternity leave and women's rights, Sweden may be a glimpse of the future.

Laws reserving at least two months of the generously paid, 13-month parental leave exclusively for fathers – a quota that could well double after the September election – have set off profound social change in this country.

Companies have come to expect employees to take leave irrespective of gender, and not to penalize fathers at promotion time. Women's paychecks are benefiting and the shift in fathers' roles is perceived as playing a part in lower divorce rates and increasing joint custody of children.

In perhaps the most striking example of social engineering, a new definition of masculinity is emerging.

“Many men no longer want to be identified just by their jobs,” said Bengt Westerberg, who long opposed quotas but as deputy prime minister phased in a first month of paternity leave in 1995. “Many women now expect their husbands to take at least some time off with the children.”

So far the New York Times.

The main point about the article is – however – that not until a new law was introduced in 1995 in Sweden – where a family would lose one month of subsidies if the father did not take daddy leave – did Swedish men actually do that. Even if parental leave replaced maternity leave already in 1974.

30 years ago a young aspiring male social democrat was appointed Minister of Church and Education in Norway. He was considered a talented and gifted politician, who later became the deputy chair person of the Norwegian Labour Party. When he came into office, he immediately gave the order to his civil servants that no meetings were to be held in the ministry until 9 o'clock in the morning. The reason? The minister took his children to school and kindergarten every morning.

At the time it was not that usual for a dad to take his children to school or fetching them in the afternoon. Today it is common in Norway to share the responsibility for the children between father and mother. Women and men participate almost on an equal level in the labour market – and at the same time they establish families. It is an integrated part of our social democratic, egalitarian society that men and women are entitled to education, to work, to marriage, to children, to a career. This is about equality, it is about human rights, it is about economic security for everybody. It is about a humanitarian society where everybody should be treated equally.

In addition - the empowerment of women contribute substantially to economic growth in our society. Norway has over decades realised and experienced what UN reports show the world today: Countries not allowing girls the same opportunities as boys are poorer than other countries. These countries will slow down their growth and development until they really empower girls and women and back such policy change with adequate funding.

And as we have learned: equality in the home sphere is necessary in order to obtain equality in the work force and in politics.

Norway was a poor country after the second world war. We have become one of the most prosperous and rich an egalitarian countries in the world. This could not have happened without the key role of women and the recognition that gender equality and equal participation in society is a necessity for economic growth for society.

Today women's participation and women's rights are essential in order to reach the UN millennium goals. The millennium goals can never be reached unless women's situation is changed in poor and fragile societies. As the goals cannot be reached without the redistribution of wealth and values: A welfare state where we see to it that the values we create are evenly distributed, and where we lift up the poor.

The example of the young Norwegian minister shows us two things: that women and men should share the responsibilities and burdens, that even ministers have to do work at home and take their children to school: be it male or female ministers.

Educational reforms and labour laws have secured that equality has become a reality. The majority of students at Norwegian universities are now girls. 80 % of all women aged 25 to 66 are in the labour force. Most mothers are working, approximately 75 % of women with children under the age of 3 and 84% with children 3 -6 years are in the labour force.

It is interesting to note that while we have one of the highest percentages of mothers in the labour force, we also have one of the highest birth rates in Europe. Women are able to have children because of the social infrastructure: Safe births and birth clinics, one year parental

leave (paid for by the state), and kindergartens for children from 1 to 6. Compulsory school from the age of 6, with a voluntary offer of child care after school hours for the youngest school children.

We believe that laws can not only be a security or a regulation. Laws can also be normative by making and changing attitudes and behaviour. We have laws against domestic violence, we have just increased the punishment for rape, we have a law making it illegal to buy sex, we have a law on equality, a law that regulates working hours and we have a law about 40 % of the underrepresented gender in 4 types of industrial companies.

Neither of this just happened. It happened because political decisions enabled it to happen. And it happened in a strong cooperation between the women's organisations inside political parties and the independent feminist movements which grew up in the 70's in the whole of Western Europe. That alliance eventually led to the influx of women into political decision making both locally, on a regional level and in Parliament.

I represent the Labour Party. In the mid-80's the Labour party introduced a quota system. In the forthcoming elections not only the Labour party filled up 40% of their lists with women. The other political parties did not dare to leave their lists to men only. They were afraid to lose their female voters.

Parallel to the quota system we introduced qualification courses called "Women can do it!", qualifying our female party members for political work. Today the political Women can do it courses have been translated and are run in 50 different countries, from Southern Sudan to Serbia, making them one of our main cultural and political export articles.

And the cooperation between women in political parties and female members of NGOs and female NGOs continued through the 80's and 90's and into the new millennium.

All the Nordic countries are today ranked among the top seven countries on "Global gender Gap Index 2009." And always on the top ten of other international statistics.

I'll here go into two particular issues in more detail:

our legal regulations of gender representations in companies
UN Security Council Res. 1325 and the Norwegian National action plan.

1. The Gender Equality Act has since 1981 contained a clause of at least 40 per cent of each gender to be represented in publicly appointed committees etc.

This leads down to our legal regulation – quota – of 40 per cent of the underrepresented gender in 4 types of companies. The most famous being the large Public Limited Companies (PLCs), (which often are noted on the stock exchange).

Let me point out a rather striking picture in this regard:

In 2003 Public Limited Companies (PLC) recruited only 7 per cent women to their boardrooms. Competent women were not seen – not recruited. Today women have taken 40 per cent of the boardroom positions in the companies affected by the regulation. Globally – the percentage of female board members in the 200 biggest companies is about 12%.

This is the result of our law adopted by a large majority in the Parliament and introduced in 2003, making it mandatory for all State owned companies, (the inter-municipal companies) and the Public Limited Companies to have at least 40 per cent of both genders in company boards. The law applies to approximately 400 companies with a total of 1400 board members. The companies affected by the law are the largest companies. The law do not affect privately owned limited companies (SMEs). Most of these are small and medium sized family enterprises.

Let me clarify that these rules do not deal with management positions in the sense of the daily run of the business. They regulate the appointment and assignment of representatives to company boards and as such they refer to the overall strategic decision-making of enterprises.

By introducing the quota-legislation, Norway was the first country in the world to demand gender balance on company boards.

We did this because we wanted a change in the numbers – and we took political decisions to make it happen. We did not shy away from measures interfering in the market.

I can add that this was proposed by a conservative government – and endorsed by the opposition (now beeing in position): a broad majority.

The quota legislation was controversial and was heavily debated in the public. The Business Confederations strongly disagreed.

In fact; the enforcement of the law was postponed due to expectation that these companies would follow suit voluntarily, with the Parliamentary decision setting a norm, but not being legally binding.

Thus, the private business sector was given a time limit until 2005 to achieve the desired gender balance. However the figures stated that the development went too slow: thus the law came into full force in 2008, after a 2 years transition period.

No new laws regarding enforcement have been passed. The rules are enforced through the normal control routines and legal systems (since 1977). We have a National Business Register that investigates all companies as to how a board is set up.

A company will not be able to operate if its composition does not meet the requirements. In fact, it may be dissolved by the court – but this has not happened, yet.

The legislation is a forceful measure, but it has gone hand in hand with other instruments. Both the main business federation and the financial sector have developed programmes and networks to train and recruit talented women. And women's competence has become more visible through databases and these networking platforms.

Let me mention some arguments which have very often been used by the business community:

Are women actually elected to boards in their professional capacity or simply just because they are women? Of course they are elected on the basis of competence!

Further; is it right to oblige company share-holders on whom they should recruit as board members? The system in Norway is that the General Assembly (all share-holders) appoints a nomination committee, which recruit good and able persons to a list that the General Assembly then can elect from.

The board has to have members from the employees as well (legal since 30 years back).

Are qualified women hard to find? Not if one looks further behind the old boy's network. The law has succeeded in forcing the nominating committees to cast their nets wider. Women were an untapped pool of talent!

Will women take on such responsibilities? Of course; if one gives them the possibilities! Today, the critics have gone silent and highly competent women have taken their righteous seats at the boardroom tables. International research shows that women in company boardrooms correlate with company performances.

Recent statistics also prove more women in management positions and in boards not covered by the law. Being on a board is a stamp of approval, they are visible and they have contacts - and as a result of this; offers of management position follows.

2. In October 2000 the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1325. It calls for women's participation in all phases of conflict prevention, conflict resolution and in peace building. This was the first time the Security Council – which is responsible for maintaining peace and security – discussed how women were affected by war and armed conflict.

Increasingly, civilians are caught in the midst of armed conflict and at the centre of targeted attacks. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable, and we see sexual violence as a part of warfare.

Women are victims of war. But let us not forget that women can be significant actors and agents for peace. Throughout history women have played crucial roles in conflict management, conflict resolution and peace building. It is important that women are participating when peace and security are being built. We know that women often have different priorities than men. Therefore women must be taken in as partners in economic and political priorities when societies are being rebuilt.

Women's issues are also security issues. 1325 is important, even if women are still in the margins of security policy.

In 2006 Norway launched a national action plan for the implementation of Res. 1325, with both national and international action points. So far, 19 countries, including several in Africa, have such action plans. Others are in the process of finalising theirs. National action plans are important signs of commitment and furthermore, the process of dialogue and consultation can have a lasting effect on any society. Therefore Norway has contributed with funding to the development of action plans to implement resolution 1325, among them Nepal and Kenya. Norway also supports a number of local women's organisations in countries affected by conflict or in post-conflict situations. We also support female politicians and their networks. And we support information sharing and training on res. 1325. We also recruit women to our security forces.

Norway finances a capacity-building programme called Training for Peace. The programme contributes to a pool of trained African civilian and police personnel to be deployed in peacekeeping operations. The 1325 related training is a prioritised aspect of the programme. Another central goal is to increase the representation of women in peace operations and ensure a strong and mainstream gender perspective. Lots of women are now participating in the courses.

We can help and share our experiences, which we do. But the main driving force must come from within the countries themselves. The process towards gender equality in Norway was initiated by women activists and women's organisations in cooperation with political parties. But it could never have taken place if it were not for political will and deliberate decisions.

Remember: Women can do it!