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Women in Power and Decision Making

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Norway

In Norway we have just celebrated 100 years of women's suffrage. When women's right to vote was unanimously accepted by Parliament in 1913, many women thought the struggle for equality was over. Now women and men would govern society together.

But 50 years later there was only a single woman in the cabinet and in local councils and parliament there was only a handful. Feminist organizations started to mobilize, demanding more women in decision-making bodies.

Living standards rose after World War II with education and health services for women. Social and economic inequalities were relatively small, and the political system was a liberal democracy with proportional elections. During the 1970s, under the impact of the second feminist wave, the number of women in politics increased. A peak was reached in 1986 with Gro Harlem Brundtland's second Labour cabinet with 8 women and 10 men ministers. And in the years that followed, the number of women ministers remained high regardless of the political colour of the cabinet. In 2013 the cabinet had 50/50 women and men with Erna Solberg from the Conservative party as Norway's second woman prime minister.

Norway is often called a "land of equality", because it is among the countries obtaining the highest score in international rankings of gender development and gender gap indexes. Compared to other countries Norway has in particular a good gender balance in higher education; women as well as men have paid employment and the participation of women in politics is considerable. But challenges remain to achieve gender equality.

Progress and innovation, such as the world's first Equal Opportunities Commissioner, the world's first "women's cabinet", self-determined abortion, paternity leave and a women's quota in board rooms, go side by side with heavy gender conservative features: persistent gender stereotypes, not least in the media, male dominance and discrimination of women. There is a tendency to conceal or underestimate gender inequalities and in many cases special measures to strengthen the position of women are resisted. Quotas

for women in politics are not established by law, but left to each political party.

Norway ratified CEDAW in 1981 and a general “equality law” was adopted, but the law was basically gender neutral and prohibited differential treatment of both men and women. Though many women got paid employment, the labour market remained strongly segregated by class and gender. Women get subordinate positions and lower pay and often work part time. The gross income of women is now on the average about 2/3 of that of men. Sexual harassment and violence are serious social problems.

Since the 1990s, the women’s movement became weaker and the participation of women in decision-making bodies stagnated. In 2012, an independent expert committee, having studied the situation, declared that Norwegian “equality-” or “mainstreaming-”policy” had failed. After several decades of such policy, majority men still earned most, dominated in the media and had most power in politics, at the expense of women and minorities. In the power elite as a whole three of four top leaders are men and the representation of men in local councils and parliament has not gone below 60 per cent. Resistance to women’s issues and women power persists.

The expert committee suggested improvement of the electoral law and establishment of a special implementation structure for gender equality in the form of a regional directorate with a ten-year development programme for local efforts to promote equality.

ECE and the World

On a global scale the representation of women in power and decision-making has increased over the years, but extremely slowly. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) noted this year that the percentage of women MPs was at a record high of 22 per cent and women ministers reached 17 per cent. The number of women presidents and prime ministers was totally 18. According to the new trends, gender parity in parliament was possible within twenty years, IPU stated.

In the ECE region as a whole, women amount to 25 per cent of the MPs and 28 per cent of the ministers in 2014. This is higher than the world average, but far from 50/50. Only 8 per cent of the presidents and prime ministers in the ECE are women.

Within ECE there is great variation. More women obtain political positions in the West than in the East. In the West there are 29 per cent women MPs and 31 per cent ministers in 2014, while there in the East are respectively only 19 and 15 per cent. Of the 7 women presidents and prime ministers 5 are in the West and 2 in the East. The fall of communism with dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc led to extensive and partly painful restructuring in the new states with serious economic problems. The political systems were unstable. Most became emerging

democracies, and male dominance continued as before. Gender equality was no major objective and the organization of women was weak.

In addition there is marked variation within each region.

Women Presidents and Prime Ministers Worldwide

I have just published a study of women presidents and prime ministers around the world: 73 women in 53 countries during half a century, from 1960 to 2010 (*Women of Power*, Policy Press, 2014). They are not many, but the number has increased since the 1990s due among others to democratization. Democracy is based on government by the people, and therefore women should participate in decision-making. But if democracy is necessary, it is not sufficient. Women have to demand their rights, and the United Nations and the international women's movement have collaborated in putting pressure on national parties and governments.

The women top leaders had varied social and economic background, but most had extraordinary qualifications: high education and long professional careers. The majority rose to power through the political parties and their persistence and courage is impressive. Not only were they newcomers in the political leadership fighting against opposition and prejudice, many of them came to power in times of crisis. There was unrest and armed conflict, transition from authoritarian to democratic rule and depression with poverty and social distress.

The women did not become top leaders primarily because they were women. To rise to the top they had to be accepted by male dominated political institutions who pressed them to conform to the majority. Some women leaders also acted in the same way as their male colleagues. But the majority made a difference, supporting women specifically to a greater or lesser degree, although only a third explicitly promoted feminist policies.

Recommendations

I would recommend that governments should:

- * take special measures to ensure that CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action are properly known to the general public, show the political consequences and establish special institutions for implementation.
- * provide financial support and societal opportunities for women's organizations and networks to participate in political deliberations at all levels and promote feminism and genuine gender equality.
- * increase social science research of the political institutions, including gender dimensions, and in particular evaluate the political culture and the role of parties in shaping an inclusive democracy where women can promote their interests on a par with men.

* ensure that electoral systems are woman-friendly: replace simple plurality with proportional representation or mixed systems, and adopt “critical special measures” such as stimulation programmes, training, support groups and effective quotas for women, to ensure at least 50 per cent women at all levels of political and economic decision-making.