

# Gender and power in the Nordic countries



A study of politics and business



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Nordic Gender Institute –  
NIKK

**Gender balance in the access to societal power is a cornerstone of the Nordic concept of democracy and gender equality politics.**

**A key tool in gender equality policy work is knowledge of the distribution of women and men within various sectors of society and positions of power.**

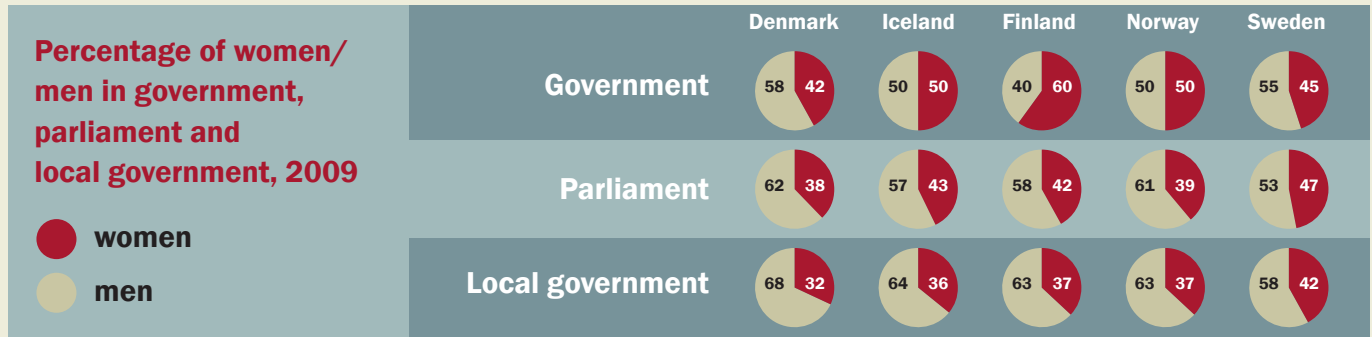
**This brochure presents the results of a year-long research project, “Gender and Power in the Nordic Countries”, which focuses on top positions in two sectors of society: Politics and Business.**

# **Gender and power in the Nordic countries**



Pressure from the women’s movement and the attention paid to gender-equality issues have been crucial to women’s progress in politics in the Nordic countries over the last 15 years. However, men still dominate business and industry.

# Success in parliamentary politics



Today it is possible for women to reach top positions in Nordic society, more so in parliamentary politics than in other areas. Parliamentary politics in the Nordic countries can be considered a gender equality success story, if a representation of 40-60 per cent for each gender is regarded as gender balanced. The current governments of the countries are gender balanced in this sense.

The previous Nordic comparison, *Equal Democracies?* (ed. Christina Bergqvist et al.), was published in 1999. At that time, the proportion of MPs in the Nordic parliaments who were women ranged between 25 and 43 per cent. By 2009, women's representation had increased and is now between 38 and 47 per cent.

However, it is no longer evident that the Nordic countries come out on top with regard to the level of gender equal development in parliamentary representation. Several countries in the Global South are approaching similar levels of representation, which challenges Nordic claims to be the most gender equal region in the world.

## Local governments less gender-equal

In all the Nordic countries, political representation is less gender-equal within local government than at the national level. The proportion of local councillors who are women varies between 32 per cent in Denmark and 42 per cent in Sweden. The lack of gender equality is even clearer when looking at the

**“Municipalities are something of a black spot when it comes to gender equality.”**

ANITA GÖRANSSON, RESEARCHER

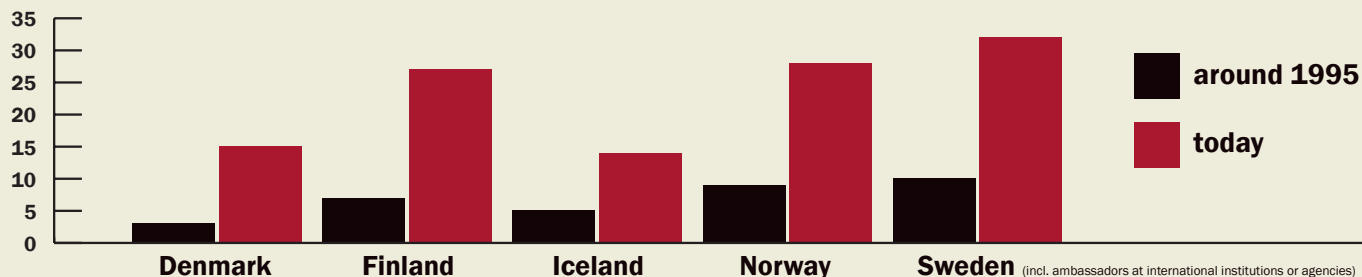
management of the municipalities. In Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden the proportion of local government leaders who are women is between 20 and 32 per cent. In Denmark the proportion of leaders who are women at this political level is as low as 14 per cent.

## Examples on gender equality measures:

- **Quotas for public boards and committees** require a minimum 40 per cent representation for each gender. The quotas have had an impact – provided that law enforcement has been monitored by gender equality authorities and the ministers in charge.
- **Quotas for municipal committees and councils** require a minimum 40 per cent representation for each gender. Such quotas have been established by law in Finland and Norway.
- **Quotas in political parties**, both for the parties' internal organs and for party electoral lists. The parties play a key role in the development of political representation since they nominate the candidates that voters can vote for and place them on elective or non-elective seats on their lists.

# Positive changes within diplomacy

## Percentage of women ambassadors



One area seldom included in gender equality discussions, but where interesting changes can be observed, is diplomacy. The proportion of female ambassadors has increased from a very low level to about 15 per cent in Denmark and Iceland and to about 30 per cent in Finland, Norway and Sweden.

The recipe for this success is in short: Gender equality politics. Deliberate strategies to achieve a better gender balance and clear quantitative goals produce results, experiences from the Nordic countries show.

In Finland, there is a stated objective to have a 50-50 gender balance in the foreign service work force – from top to bottom.

In Norway, one has set up a personnel policy that emphasises that women should be recruited to the job categories where they are underrepresented. If a vacancy is applied for by an equal number of women and men, the underrepresented gender is to be preferred. The target is 40 per cent women in the ambassadorial corps.

“Women are encouraged to apply for ambassadorial posts, and at least one woman is always called for interview – provided female candidates have the right qualifications,” says Ragnhild Imerslund, Assistant Director at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

And every time an ambassador or other senior post is filled in the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs efforts are made to encourage that there are candidates of both genders as part of

a goal to ensure that 40-60 per cent of all the employees in the foreign service be women.

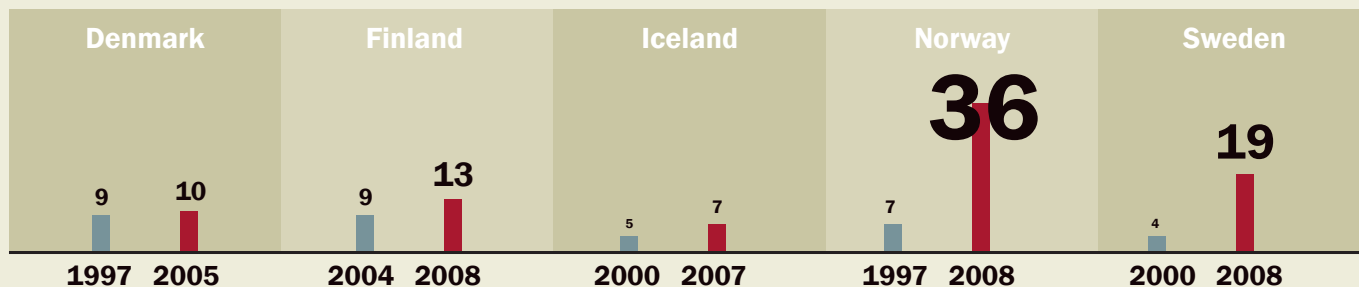
“Gender equality policy is an integral part of our work,” says Harald Sandberg, Head of Human Resources at Sweden’s Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

In Denmark, too, a gender equality policy has been formulated within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, yet the proportion of female ambassadors is not that high.



# Male dominance in business

## Percentage of women board members in companies listed on the stock market



The project focussed on companies listed on the stock market and state-owned companies and their management structures. An important – but hardly surprising – finding is that male dominance persists in business.

The representation of women on the boards of listed companies has increased somewhat during the last decade. Today between 7 and 36 per cent of the seats on the boards of listed companies are held by women, compared with 4-9 per cent in the late 1990s.

The figures are higher in the public corporations, because they are generally influenced by the equality laws' provisions for gender parity of at least 40 per cent of each sex on the boards and in senior management positions. It is clear that politics can contribute to more equality in business.

The situation is best in Norway, where the law on gender quotas has increased the proportion of women on the boards

**“The business community should resolve this issue itself, but it is no use to do nothing if you are trying to keep politics and politicians out of it.”**

– CHRISTER HALLERBY, SWEDISH SECRETARY OF STATE

of companies listed on the stock exchange. The proportion of women increased from 9 to 36 per cent in five years.

However, management in private companies is still almost totally dominated by men, even in countries where there has been an increase in the proportion of women on company boards.

### Examples on gender equality measures:

- The Norwegian law on gender quotas on the boards of public joint stock companies has been effective, but so far no diffusion effects within the companies have been observed: the chairpersons are still 95 per cent men and among the CEOs male dominance is almost complete.
- A “code of conduct” was introduced in Sweden in 2004. The code applies to all larger companies listed on the Stockholm Stock Exchange and it stipulates that companies should aim for gender-balanced representation on the boards. It makes no provisions for sanctions, but it has nonetheless had an impact when combined with the threat of the introduction of quotas. A similar code of conduct was introduced in Denmark in 2007 and in Finland in 2009.
- In action oriented gender studies researchers together with middle managers engage in research-based development work on an organisational level, with the intention both to reveal and to change the way gender is usually constructed within organisations.



# The quota law

**“If the law hadn’t been introduced, we would never have reached the targets that all agree are important to reach.”**

SIRI FÜRST, MANAGER AND BOARD MEMBER

Since 1 January 2008 Norwegian law stipulates that all public joint stock companies (ASA) must have a board comprising at least 40 per cent of each gender.

“If the law hadn’t been introduced, we would never have reached the targets that all agree are important to reach,” says manager and board member Siri Fürst.

Her most important argument is that this will result in many more qualified candidates to choose from. And female candidates for board membership proved not to be that hard to find; they had just not previously been in the recruiters’ field of vision.

“I have a hypothesis that the appointment committees now work much more systematically in their search for board members, and this includes finding both men and women,” says researcher Vibeke Heidenreich.

Those women who had already served on corporate boards when the law came into force, on the whole find that the law is a good thing, as it gives greater numbers of competent women the opportunity they themselves enjoy.

Siri Fürst moreover thinks that one advantage of having more women on the company board is that she is no longer categorised as the representative of a minority.

The approximately 400 public joint stock companies are the largest and most important within Norwegian trade and industry. The law also covers all state, inter-municipal and municipal companies, and it recently was extended to include cooperative companies.



# General conclusions: Visibility and pressure crucial

**T**he study draws attention to an important distinction that exists between visible positions sensitive to observation, as for example in parliamentary politics, and less visible positions where gender equality issues are not observed as intensively or not at all.

The socio-political debate, coverage of gender issues and pressure from the women's movement is crucial to progress in gender equality.

The project results show that the laws or recommendations that since the late 1980s proposed gender balanced representation on public boards and committees have been effective. Similarly, pressure from women's organisations and feminist debaters since the 1970s and 1980s, more or less forced the political parties to review their internal party democracy and nomination practices.

## **Not actively seeking female leaders**

The women's movement has not directed similar pressure in respect of election to the boards of private companies. Considerations of business autonomy and respect for personal independence have set the framework for the gender discussion.

Gender equality measures within the world of business are often – with the exception of the Norwegian quotas in public joint stock companies – aimed at increasing the number of female managerial candidates. However, it remains to be seen

when the business sector will actively seek out female leaders, as the world of politics does today.

## **Horizontal segregation a challenge**

Equal representation of women and men at the same level, can lead to status differences as a result of women and men dominating different functions and working within different areas. It is most common that women are underrepresented in policy areas such as defence, and economic and business affairs. The opposite applies to areas such as social affairs, culture, education and gender equality.

Horizontal gender division of labour in business is more difficult to chart. However, the preliminary results suggest that a higher proportion of women in senior positions is primarily found in financial and service companies, and in the health services. Finding indicators for measuring and evaluating horizontal segregation is a challenge for gender equality research.

## **Gaps in public statistics**

The project has also shown that there are gaps in the public statistics in all countries, which makes it impossible to follow the development of gender equality within politics and business in a structured way. This concerns, for example, local government and public administration in all countries, as well as the private corporate sector.

# More information

- **“Gender and power in the Nordic countries” is the first project of its kind to map and compare the top positions in politics and business in the Nordic countries.**
- **A total of 20 researchers studied gender-policy developments and initiatives over the last 15 years.**
- **The research was conducted by the Nordic Gender Institute (NIKK), on behalf of the Nordic Council of Ministers.**
- **More information about the project is available at [www.nikk.no/english](http://www.nikk.no/english) along with a number of more in-depth research articles.**



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