

FemCities Conference 2016

Women in political decision-making positions at local level

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Dear colleagues,

First of all many thanks to the organizers of this conference!

More women in politics, that's what this conference and this panel are all about.

Conditions differ from one country to another, and at the same time it is the same old problem everywhere.

We have a lot of wonderful men in politics, but they tend to take up too much place.

To get more elbow-room for women, we must look around and learn from the experience in different places.

So my task is to report on Sweden. Ten million people, 290 municipalities, 21 county councils and regions who all are members of the Swedish Association of Local and Regional Authorities, SALAR.

We do have a good tail-wind for feminism up in the north, but still many there are many imbalances.

We have a strong system of local self-government in Sweden that is based on direct income taxes. This differs us for some of the other European countries but is very important for the local democracy. We pay around 20 percent of our income to the municipality and around 10 per cent to the county council or region.

In return, the municipalities takes care of the pre-schools, schools, elder care and local infrastructure and the county councils and regions are responsible of health care and local transportation.

That means a lot of public employees.

Most local employees are women, many in jobs that are paid less than the jobs in the private sector. So gender issues start already there.

Besides fighting with the central government on a lot of different issues, the Swedish Association of Local and Regional Authorities, SALAR, with a staff of 450 is also the biggest employer organization in the country as our members are the employers of more than one million people.

When it comes to politics the situation is not so bad.

- The five biggest cities are led by women - Stockholm, Göteborg, Malmö, Uppsala and Linköping.
- 38 % of the mayors are women.

And then the female share continues along the same line:

- 37 % of all chairmanships in the municipalities
- 42 % of the full time remunerated elected
- 45 % of the part time remunerated elected
- 43 % of all elected in the municipalities.

This could be worse, and not so long ago it was of course worse.

Today quotas in politics is very much debated around the world. I was recently at the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. My colleague, Inger Linge, presented a report on Women's political participation and representation at local and regional level. The report invites local and regional authorities to ensure that representation of women in any decision-making body does not fall under 40 % and encourages them to develop gender-disaggregated statistics to monitor and evaluate the evolution of elections. This is important to have the numbers and to be able to compare I think. The report also calls on government to consider adoption of legislative reforms to implement quotas for candidates in elections and to revise the electoral system where it has a negative impact on woman's political participation.

But in Sweden we don't quotas. So how did we get where we are today?

Many forces at work, but not so much legal compulsion. There have never been any formal quotas set in law.

But there has been some useful competition between the political parties.

It started out when one of them proclaimed that every second candidate on its ballots would be a woman.

It took some time to reach that goal but the idea proved contagious, so women in other parties followed suit. After a decade or so they had all fallen into line.

But of course it has been setbacks. In the end of the 1980s some women thought the gender balance in politics was going in totally the wrong direction. So around 20 women who called themselves the “support stockings” met and had secret meetings in a basement room in one of the suburbs of Stockholm. They were led by three media savvy women who were very active in the debate. The support stocking women were very worried about the situation so they threatened to create a women only ballot in the election. All the political parties were very afraid and result was dramatic increase of women on all the ballots of the political parties. I know a bit about it because my mother was one of these women.

Not that everybody complied gleefully with the rule. There were pockets of resistance here and there. There was the usual harping about the lack of competent women.

But after some time ballot parity had become the established norm, and you could say shame to deviant party organisations.

And a very contagious norm at that. Even outside politics.

When I watch television programs abroad I am often surprised by the all-male panels invited to discuss various issues.

Grey suits everywhere. Quite boring.

In Sweden, I am happy to report, no TV journalist would any longer dare to present four same-sex experts on any issue whatsoever brought up for discussion.

The norm is quite powerful.

Now, a very important reason for the gender shift in Sweden is the electoral system.

As you may know we have proportional representation (PR), and the ballots for various political bodies – parliament, regional council and municipal council – are all determined at meetings where all party members are entitled to vote, or sometimes the elected representatives of the local party organisations.

Proportional representation makes it easier to enforce gender balance principles.

Where you have single-candidate constituencies the balance can only come about in the whole parliament or the whole council, and it doesn't.

Whether the majority system is first-past-the-post as in Britain or organized in two successive rounds as in France, the gender outcome is regularly skewed.

Another thing that promotes gender balance in Sweden is the way ballots are determined, always at party nomination meetings where either all members have a right to vote or in some cases representatives of local party organisations.

This is different in many places.

In some countries you choose someone to top the list, and that person is then entrusted with the task of selecting all the others.

May be good for team-building and loyalty, perhaps, but not so good for gender balance.

The technique where every second candidate is a man and every second is a woman has come to be called the “zipper” model. You know, zippers, two sides that meet when you get dressed.

Not a bad principle, but zippers can get stuck in many different ways.

Let me report on two hitches observed in Sweden.

The first one occurs in small parties that have only one or a few seats in each constituency.

If most top positions go to male candidates, the female one step down may never get in and the entire team of that party may become very skewed, gender-wise. One good advice I got once is refuse to be number two and always head for the top.

The second problem occurs when male-dominated nomination meetings are called upon to select female candidates.

Under a zipper system, some places on the list are reserved for women and other for men.

So you don't get a battle between the sexes but a series of battles inside the sexes.

Men against men, women against women.

But with arbiters of both sexes, depending on the composition of the party membership or the representatives entitled to vote at nomination meetings.

So if a roomful of men gets to choose among several women, young charm often beats mature experience.

The zipper system is sometimes harsh on elderly experienced female politicians.

Now, getting onto the ballot and getting elected is of course only part of the story.

For real parity in local politics, there are also a lot of other obstacles.

Like the way women are treated by journalists and fellow politicians.

A lot of attention to dress and the outer trimmings. We can see the numbers of articles about Theresa Mays shoes. Which paper wrote anything about Donald Trumps?

Condescendence camouflaged as politesse.

Back-handed compliments by colleagues pretending to be gentlemen.

There are many male habits in politics that tend to reduce the influence of women.

Berit Ås, the Norwegian social psychologist and former party leader, has come up with an interesting list of five methods employed to reinforce male supremacy.

- Render your opponent invisible.
- Ridicule her.
- Avoid sharing relevant information.
- Give her two options and then criticize her for whatever choice she makes, and
- Don't forget to invoke her sense of guilt and shame.

How many of you in this room have ever met one of these? Please raise your hands. But when seeing them and talking about them it is much easier to handle. So do talk about how you treat and is being treated by political colleagues. A good thing to do is also like many men do, enforce the person that spoke before.

Other preconditions for parity in local politics are more practical.

You need a home base, and that base may be very demanding.

There may be kids to take of, or parents, or other relatives.

Parity in politics requires parity at home.

That's easier said than done, of course. But unless we say so and say so quite often, it will never get done.

When Tony Blair was prime minister of Britain his wife Cherie said her husband certainly knew where to find the washing machine but he was perhaps not so familiar with the nicer details of how it worked.

The gender balance in local politics depends ultimately on the gender balance in our daily lives.

Many families may consider the domestic division of labour as settled once and for all, through deeply ingrained habits.

But the idea of life-long learning implies that even such habits may be modified. So keep trying. Gently, but firmly.

A divided parental leave is very important, not only to keep women in the labour market but also to make fathers assume their role in the family.

Other things that makes it easier for women to get into politics is of course a good community planning with public transports and good affordable child and elder care. We need to organise the political life so that the meetings and other events are adjusted so that family life and political activity can be combined.

Let me now conclude on a personal note.

The Swedish Association for Local and Regional Government which is my employer since 14 years is strongly committed to gender parity. It is actively promoting the agenda of the Charter and has contributed € 300.000 to the Observatory.

I am currently on leave from my job there to serve half-time as opposition leader in a Stockholm suburb, an island with some 46.000 inhabitants.

Another half-time I spend as a member of the Stockholm county council, mainly on health-care matters.

And a third half-time then goes to my family, with three kids between three and ten.

Did I miscalculate in combining half-times? Perhaps, but that's life.

Squeezing all these tasks into the 24 hours of the day and the 7 days of the week remains a work in progress, with many time conflicts, improvisations, and continuous domestic negotiations. Plus a little help from my mother.

My husband's job is quite demanding as a vice-president of a big company, as many jobs are, but we do try very much to divide up the tasks on the home front. Unlike the situation in 10 Downing Street, the washing machine is a shared domain.

I think that gender equality starts with the choice of a good spouse. And it is also important to be aware of while raising our sons and daughters. I personally don't think there is gene that makes me or my daughters a better cook, however some training is of course necessary and the kitchen might be quit messy afterwards....

The other choices will have to be made by and by.

That is what family life is all about, and that's what local government is all about.

So what can we do to get more women into politics?

No party, no municipality or country has all the answers.

No simple, single strategy can be applied everywhere.

But we **can** pick up a few ideas and a few tricks here and there, and that is why meetings such as this one are so useful.

When I was asked in this speech to give some good advices and when preparing this speech I asked some wise women around me.

The former Swedish Ministry of Gender balance said:

- Be brave, you can do it.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Be a good networker.

- Try to understand where the power is.
- And finally don't ever take it personally.

Finally, I should like to emphasize the following:

- Gender equality is not a women's issue – it is in all senses an issue affecting both men and women!
- We political leaders have the power to change!
- Work strategically to attain your goal!
- You can do it, good luck!

So, again, thanks to the organizers and thanks all of you for your attention!