

Work to promote gender equality at the Åland Parliament

Only eight women were elected to the Åland Parliament in 2011. The parliament has 30 deputies, so just under 27 per cent are women. This places Åland far down the list in the company of less democratic countries. The Åland government has half women, half men. When four of the elected female deputies became ministers they left their seats in the Åland Parliament and were replaced by two women and two men. The end result was that only six of the 30 deputies in the parliament are female.

Out of the total number of valid votes in the elections to the Åland Parliament 34.7 per cent went to the female candidates. Out of those voting in the elections 52.3 per cent were women. Together the female candidates mustered close to 4,500 votes while the male candidates received nearly 8,500. The election figures show that the men received a better return than the women in terms of mandates in relation to the number of votes. For the male candidates the number of votes required for each mandate was 385, against 562 for the female candidates.

The large number of votes required for a female mandate marks a difference compared with 2007, when the required number was the same on average, with the result that the number mandates for each sex in the previous elections was more representative of its share of the votes.

Today, after a minor reshuffle of the government, the parliament has seven women out of 30 and the government three out of seven. These ten women who work more or less full-time in politics have received a good return in terms of positions. My party, the Centre Party, has two women in the group where I hold Åland's highest political position as speaker and our second woman is Minister for Infrastructure in the government. Among the Liberals in the opposition one of the women is deputy speaker while the other is chairman of the Legal and Cultural Committee. Among the Social Democrats, which have three women, one of the women is the Head of the Åland Government and another is a minister in the government. Among the Moderates one woman is group chairman. So seven out of ten women have leading positions. The same comparison for the men shows that out of 27 men the Centre Party has one Deputy Head of Government, one group chairman and one committee chairman. The Liberals have one group leader and one committee chairman. The Social Democrats have one committee chairman, the Moderates have one deputy chairman and three ministers while Åland's Future has a group leader. Ten out of 27 men thus have leading positions.

Although the women received a good return in terms of positions it is unfortunate that the number of women at the highest political level in Åland is so low. Women are, for example, in a minority in the three standing committees. In the Finance, Industry, Trade and Agriculture Committee and in the Social and Environmental Committee only one out of seven members is a woman and in the Legal and Cultural Committee only two out of seven members are women. Experience shows that both sexes need to be more evenly represented to ensure that the whole broad perspective is illumined and addressed.

The Åland Parliament has decided that it is necessary to produce an analysis of the reasons why the share of elected women is low prior to the next elections, which will take place this autumn. The political parties have a responsibility for ensuring that we obtain more knowledge of why women

decline to stand for election and take on political duties. The goal should be to increase women's weight in decision-making so that we can benefit from their knowledge and experience. Relevant research from the rest of the Nordic region and Europe should be used to shed light on the issue. The Åland Parliament has also encouraged the Åland Government and the party groups to work together to agree on a set of measures for improving gender equality in Åland's political decision-making bodies.

A framework programme for promotion of gender equality – the Government of Åland Framework Programme for Gender Equality 2012-2015 – has been adopted. In areas where Åland does not have legislative powers, for instance with regard to limited companies and other associations, opinion-shaping is an increasingly important tool for achieving change in Ålandic society.

As speaker and leader of the parliament, I have tried to do my bit to bring about change in the longer term. At the beginning of the mandate period all members of parliament gathered for a talk by Professor Drude Dahlerup on representation in popularly elected bodies and the importance of a balanced representation of women and men, quotas and the drawbacks of a single-sex parliament. After the talk the members separated into groups to discuss what we can do to change things after the next elections.

The conclusion was that the next elections will be the "last chance" to achieve a more even representation. If that fails, legislation governing representation will be discussed. In the run-up to the next elections the parties will be responsible for recruiting a sufficient number of female candidates, giving prominence to women and devising measures for increasing female representation. In the 2011 elections several parties had the same number of female and male candidates, yet two of the parties still failed to get even a single woman elected. This result, too, raises many questions and needs to be analysed.

I had the pleasure of chairing the CALRE Gender Equality Working Group in 2013.

We continued the work initiated by the South Tyrol that is aimed at exploring gender equality in parliamentary bodies and women's involvement in decision-making. The report produced by Professor Lenita Freidenvall established that a majority of member states (47 of 77 regions) has at least a large minority of women elected and within this group 18 members (23.4 per cent) achieve a statistical gender balance. However, there are significant differences among the regions, ranging from 42.2 per cent in Spain to 14.8 per cent in Italy. In the report she also shows that women parliamentarians do not have access to power in parliament to the same extent as men. For instance, women preside over parliamentary committees to a lesser extent than men. To redress this situation, parliaments could implement measures such as:

- Adopting special measures to ensure that a higher number of women are selected by parties to run in winnable seats
- Conducting awareness-raising campaigns on the importance of gender balance in decision-making
- Supporting mentorship programmes

To improve the leadership status of women, parliaments could implement measures such as:

- Rotating positions of parliamentary leadership between women and men over a period of time
- Introducing dual leadership for parliamentary structures through the appointment of a man and a woman
- Encouraging an equal distribution of women and men across all committees
- Paying attention to which political issues women have opportunities to lead and which issues are still dominated by men

Parliaments can also become more gender-sensitive by implementing measures such as

- Introducing a gender equality policy setting forth concrete actions for addressing gender equality issues along with indicators to measure progress, which are monitored regularly
- Implementing a gender mainstreaming strategy to ensure that a gender perspective is included in the entire parliamentary organisation
- Introducing operational and supporting policies of the parliament, such as media and communication policies and anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies
- Ensuring the use of gender-sensitive language in all official documents
- Ensuring that political duties and infrastructure at the workplace reflect contemporary work and family realities facing parliamentarians by rescheduling sitting hours, avoiding late voting and aligning sitting times with the school calendar. Additional measures include allocating space in the parliamentary building for a childcare centre and family room.

I invited Professor Freidenvall to our parliament to present the report and discuss measures with the deputies.

This year we have followed up this work at gender equality breakfast meetings. We chose breakfast because it is so incredibly difficult to find times for meetings that work for everyone. In Sweden discussions on gender equality and other training of parliamentarians take place regularly, and the committees' working hours are used to ensure that everyone is present and able to come. We chose to invite the deputies for breakfast at a hotel at 8 a.m. This is a concept that I warmly recommend. At 8 a.m. few people are booked up, breakfast is something that everyone needs and having it at a hotel in your home town adds a certain excitement.

So far we have had two breakfast meetings with the themes "What will be the next step?" and "How can we make a difference? Putting the spotlight on the rules of the game by highlighting and changing."

Dear friends. It is hard to work on gender equality and achieve the desired result from your work. We have a low representation of women but the women have received a very good return in terms of positions. Still, it would be interesting to look into where the power resides. Is it in the hands of the women or does it move when women are appointed?

Another issue is that it is hard to persuade women to stand for election. Many women doubt whether they have the required expertise, whether they would be able to cope with the role and whether they will have enough time. In this regard many ideas and measures and education are needed, so that those who feel uncertain can acquire the necessary knowledge.

In our parliament we rarely have plenary sessions after 5 p.m., so that deputies can have dinner with their families. Yet, for those deputies who, in addition to their work in parliament, also need to go shopping, make food and help the children with their homework the burden is still too great. As we have plenary sessions only two days a week, perhaps we should allow these to run into the evening. Then we would force the other partner to take care of the cooking and homework on those days... I say this half in jest, and perhaps it is also unreasonable for those who are single, but perhaps it is an idea that could lead on to something good?

There is no doubt that women are interested in politics and that women have opinions and want to wield influence. The question is whether today's system appeals to women. Political practices have been the same for decades, or even centuries. Political practices have been shaped by men for men but do they suit women?

When women have been elected, do they have power? Do they have influence and visibility? Do they feel that they make a difference? Or have the decisions in reality been made among men before at meetings and in phone calls?

What do you think? I would be interested to hear your comments and receive your questions. Thank you for your time.

Britt Lundberg, Speaker of the Åland Parliament

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