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Theme: The Nordic Council of Ministers at 50



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Nordic cooperation during extreme times

The Nordic Council of Ministers is 50 this year. Meanwhile, the cooperation between the Nordic countries is being challenged more than ever since 1971. But many things have also worked and we have gained new insight into the importance of our open borders.

EDITORIAL

24.03.2021

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

During the Nordic Council's 19th session in Copenhagen between 13 and 18 February 1971, the prime ministers announced that the Nordic governments would formalise their cooperation. One of the Council of Ministers' first jobs was to establish a Nordic volcanological institute in Reykjavik. Nordvulk has recently been very busy with the first volcanic eruption in 800 years at Reyjkanes, 40 kilometres from Reykjavik.

Nearly 50 year of volcanic research means the Icelanders can say with a great degree of certainty that this will be a small eruption which will not threaten the capital.

The Corona pandemic is a nearly equally rare occurrence.

"We must remember this is a once in a century event," said Vibeke Rovsing Lauritzen, Denmark's Ambassador to Sweden, during one of the seminars hosted by the Nordic Council of Ministers on Nordic Day on 23 February as part of its 50th anniversary celebrations.

In this edition, the Nordic Labour Journal reports from two of the webinars. In one, the Nordics were compared to a family in need of therapy. In the other, it was pointed out that there is a need for intensive Nordic cooperation to make sure Nordic citizens regain their pre-Corona confidence to seek jobs, study or buy second homes in a different country.

The northern border region between Finland and Sweden is one of the areas that have merged the most. After an entire year with controlled borders, we look at things from the points of view of a Finnish border guard and a Finnish nurse, illustrated by Cata Portin's evocative photographs.

Gender equality has always been a term laced with pride for the Nordics. We take a look at the state of 24 different positions of power in each of the countries on International Women's Day, 8 March, and describe the journey from 1971 and few female government ministers to today's situation when four in five Nordic prime ministers are female.

It has been a long fight, but there are still major gender differences in certain occupations. NIKK has reviewed research papers on commission from the Nordic Council of Ministers to find out why only 32% of those who take a science, technology or mathematic education are women while 68% are men.

The conclusion is that you cannot think you can change this simply by trying to motivate the women as long as they do not get equal pay for equal work in occupations that are considered to be male.

We meet 25-year-old Ingvild Wang in Trondheim who chose one of the most male-dominated educations there is. She is often the only woman in meetings, yet she loves her job. She used to dismantle radios as a child and learned about sinus and cosinus while cross-country skiing. She has attended her share of technology camps for girls but remains an optimist.

"I think such measures have been effective and they have been important. But special recruitment measures for girls will probably be less important with time," she says.

There is, however, now a need to take more than two genders into consideration. We write about what it means to obtain an LGBTI certification like the Dunker Culture House in Helsingborg has done. The courses do focus on gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex people. But the experiences gained also provide more general insight in how visitors should be treated and environments shaped.

Among the most important megatrends in society today are digitalisation, climate change and globalisation.

"No country can implement effective policies alone. Our national systems need to be able to talk to each other," points out Pyry Niemi, Chair of the Nordic Council's Committee on Growth and Development in the Nordic Region.

The green change which is needed in order to reach our climate goals must also be driven by more than top-down

decision-making. The Global Deal is an initiative aimed at strengthening social dialogue. It was initiated by Sweden in cooperation with the ILO and the OECD, where it now has its secretariat. What will happen to the initiative when the OECD gets its new Secretary-General?

The Nordic countries see the EU Commission's proposed directive on minimum wages as a backwards step for the labour market. Kerstin Ahlberg, our labour law expert, writes about the latest development.

Future Nordic mobility depends on crisis cooperation

Increased Nordic cooperation is needed before Nordic citizens can regain pre-Corona levels of confidence to apply for jobs, study or buy second homes in a different Nordic country. That was the message at a conference on border obstacles on Nordic Day 2021.

NEWS

24.03.2021

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER

We need to stand together in times of crisis. The opposite happened when the Corona pandemic hit the Nordic countries. They all introduced their own border and immigration restrictions at great practical, economical and personal cost to many citizens. It also flew in the face of the crown jewel of Nordic cooperation – free movement across borders.

How can mobility be reinstated and citizens' trust be regained? That was one of the themes during five online conferences marking the 50th anniversary of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Bertel Haarder, the Nordic Council of Ministers President and member of the Freedom of Movement Council, described the anniversary conference's sombre backdrop:

“The Nordic gold is being put to the test. Trust has been weakened, especially in the border areas, where citizens struggle to understand the measures that have obstructed them for a whole year.”

He pointed to the fact that Denmark was the first Nordic country to abandon the Nordic freedom of movement by closing its border to Sweden when the pandemic hit in 2020. Sweden followed up, and Danish citizens on the island of Bornholm could not celebrate Christmas with family members in the rest of Denmark.

According to Bertel Haarder, Norway set a “discrimination record” by forcing Swedish workers in Norway to eat their breakfast in separate rooms while wearing vests identifying them as Swedish.

“When there is a crisis, the Nordic countries put themselves first,” said the Nordic Council of Ministers President.

A long-term crisis of trust

The Nordic Council of Ministers' Secretary-General Paula Lehlomäki called this “a major challenge” for Nordic cooperation and said the Nordic perspective was absent and still

is from decisions which the Nordic countries are planning to make for border closures and quarantine rules in order to control the spread of Corona.

“This is the core problem as I see it,” said Paula Lehlomäki.

She predicts that citizens' desire to work and study in a different country – within or outside of the Nordics – will remain diminished for a long time.

A survey made for the Freedom of Movement Council shows that 80% of those who live and work in Nordic border regions experience limits being put on their opportunity to move across borders, due to Covid 19,

Still to be solved tax problem

The participants shared examples from across the Nordic countries of how Corona-related border obstacles these past 12 months have split families and complicated the working life for people who commute to a different Nordic country. Some of the obstacles have been overcome through Nordic cooperation, like which country a cross-border commuter should be registered in for social security purposes when having to work from home.

Meanwhile, no solution has yet been found for which country cross-border commuters should pay taxes in when they have to work from home involuntarily because of Covid 19. This creates a great conundrum for workers, employers and tax authorities in all the countries, said Malin Dahl, the site manager for Øresunddirekt Sweden.

“Taxation is by far the most common issue we are asked to provide advice on. It creates huge levels of frustration,” she said.

These words made the Nordic Council of Ministers President Bertel Haarder promise he would write to the Nordic coun-

tries' governments again – for the fourth time, he said – asking them to solve the issue of taxation.

People representing Danes and Norwegians owning second homes in Sweden were urging action. They wish to be able to start using and look after their properties in Sweden again.

Crisis preparedness and evaluation

All the participants agreed that everything must be done to prevent new crises from wrecking Nordic mobility in the same way that the pandemic has. Some suggested the establishment of some kind of joint Nordic crisis preparedness team which would make sure the Nordics kept open a dialogue aimed at avoiding or at least lessen the effects of border closures and other limitations to Nordic citizens' ability to move across borders.

Bertel Haarder said he would raise this during his next meeting with the Nordic prime ministers, and was cautiously optimistic that the Nordics would learn from the current crisis in Nordic cooperation.

“I do not think we will see the same thing happen again. We in the Nordics want to learn from this,” he said.

The Nordic Council of Ministers Secretary-General Paula Lehlomäki underlined the importance of having a thorough evaluation of the Corona crisis in the Nordic cooperation with the aim of learning from it and succeeding in cooperating even closer in the Nordics going forward – including when or if another crisis occurs.

Close ministerial contact

Denmark's Minister for Nordic Cooperation Flemming Møller Mortensen sent a video message where he called the pandemic “a straight-jacket” for Nordic cooperation and said he “understood” the challenges faced by Nordic cross-border commuters. But he also pointed out that he did not see any alternative to the national decisions on border controls during the pandemic. They were necessary.

The minister underlined the importance of Nordic countries staying in close contact with each other during future crises and when working to realise the vision of making the Nordics the most sustainable and integrated region in the world. He described his own dialogue with Nordic ministerial colleagues as “good”, “close” and “honest”.

The Nordics – a family in need of therapy?

The pandemic has challenged both the Nordic cooperation and trust between Nordic citizens. But many of the challenges ahead call for joint action on climate, welfare and sustainable development. The Nordic cooperation is deadly necessary, underlines Finland, which holds the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2021.

NEWS

24.03.2021

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN

“Our cooperation has without doubt been challenged by the pandemic. So the question is: What do we learn from the crisis and how do we move forward? Because we want to move on and we stick to our vision that the Nordics should be the world’s most sustainable and integrated region,” says Anna Hallberg, Sweden’s Minister for Nordic Cooperation.

She opened the seminar “How do we face an increased demand for cooperation and joint solutions in the Nordic region”, held in Stockholm on Nordic Day on 23 March. Behind her, a screen with the Nordic flags.

“I am proud, yes even touched by the Nordic cooperation. The Nordic region is home, we are a family. But we have learnt that you can never take a relationship for granted, even though we solved many problems during this period.”

The ambition for Nordic cooperation is high. In August 2019 the Nordic ministers for cooperation agreed that the Nordics should become the world’s most sustainable and integrated region by 2030. Then the pandemic hit and changed the freedom of movement between the countries overnight.

Suddenly there were police monitoring the borders that had been open to Nordic citizens in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway since 1957 – and since 1965 also Iceland. The common labour market also has a decades-long history, alongside the close cooperation in the border regions.

Us and them

Anna Hallberg referred to conversations she had had with people in the border regions, where many – often encouraged by their governments – have been working across country borders. Suddenly they have seen those borders close and their daily security vanish. But they have also felt the unfamiliar division into “us and them”. This was echoed by Gunilla Carlsson (Social Democrats), Vice-President of the Swedish delegation to the Nordic Council.

“Solidarity has been put to the test and it is important to deal with this. But we also need to look forward. We need to work for a better dialogue between the countries’ governments before important decisions like closing borders are made.

“A trickier issue which is uncomfortable to address is what has happened to human relations and our trust in each other,” she says.

Carlsson talks about Swedish workers forced to wear yellow vests in a neighbouring country and about a Danish driver who was nearly forced off the road driving a Swedish-registered car in Denmark. In a leisure boat harbour in Åland, Swedish boats had to moor at a separate quay because Finnish boat owners did not want them close by.

“How do we create trust so that we can work, live and be together? The crisis shows how very important freedom of movement is. This is perhaps something we have not thought too much about earlier, and we have taken it for granted,” says Gunilla Carlsson.



Nordic representatives in Stockholm in conversation: Liisa Talonpoika, Finland; Christian Syse, Norway and Vibeke Rousing Lauritzen, Denmark.

Yet even though there has been some tough talk and the creation of an us and them between Sweden and the other countries, it is important to look ahead, points out Christian Syse, Norway's Ambassador to Sweden.

“We all need to take a step back here. Sweden has 11 times the death rate of the other Scandinavian countries. The risk of infection is what has created these situations, but we do see how important the Nordic relationships are. Sweden is for instance Norway's most important trading partner,” he says.

Want to see a more honest dialogue

He, along with Finnish Ambassador Liisa Talonpoika and Danish Ambassador Vibeke Roving Lauritzen, have been invited to chair a conversation on the Nordic cooperation based on their positions as diplomats in Sweden – a country that has been standing out both through its Corona strategy and a high infection rate. During the pandemic, the Nordic ambassadors have talked together more than ever and have held joint meetings with government ministries and the political leadership.

“We must remember that this is a once in a century event. Sweden is a transit route to Bornholm and many have second homes in southern Sweden. What I hope will come out of this is that next time we will be better coordinated and will talk to each other before making decisions,” says Vibeke Roving Lauritzen.

“So much has happened that we could not have foreseen. All the countries have tried to protect their own populations. Although I don't want to point any fingers, I wish it could have happened in a smoother manner with a more honest dialogue. ‘I will now make a decision that you will not like’,” says Liisa Talonpoika.

Christian Syse wants to remind us of everything that has actually worked. The iron ore trains between Kiruna and Narvik have been running, export and import have been flowing through the Gothenburg harbour and Swedish healthcare staff have been able to work in Norway.

The three ambassadors, along with the Minister for Nordic Cooperation Anna Hallberg and Gunilla Carlsson from the Nordic Council of Ministers, are eager to underline the importance of what has worked and to highlight the important issues to be addressed in order to fulfil the vision for 2030.

A fresh survey also shows that Nordic citizens want to see more Nordic cooperation. One point of order during the Finnish Presidency is creating a sustainable construction sector.

“The construction industry represents one of the biggest climate gas emitters – more than you think if you include homes and society as a whole. This is about changing energy sources and construction materials, amongst other things,” says Liisa Talonpoika.

Circular economy

The idea is to cooperate on various projects and to exchange knowledge and experiences. It is all part of moving towards a circular economy and believing that the Nordic countries, which together make up the world's eleventh largest economy, can be at the forefront of this development.

Moderator Sharon Jåma wonders whether the thinking around this has been a kind of therapy during and after the crisis?

“We don't need therapy, we need cooperation. When something is taken from you, you miss it and now there is a thirst for cooperation,” says Liisa Talonpoika.

“We have close cooperation and we are not starting from zero. We have wonderful days ahead of us,” says Christian Syse.



LGBTI certification – more than a rainbow flag outside the building

Insecurity can stifle conversations about LGBTI – better to say nothing than risk choosing the wrong word. At the Dunkers Culture House in Helsingborg, knowledge gained from certification has had a positive effect on both visitors and the work environment. It has also increased self-confidence among staff.

NEWS

24.03.2021

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: BRITT-MARI OLSSON

“Of course the flag should be there and the certification should be something to tick off in your books. But it can also be so much more,” says Gunilla Lewerentz, operations manager at the Dunkers Culture House in Helsingborg. It is one of the city’s six LGBTI certified companies.

“It is easy to think you are a relatively open-minded person, but then you come across deeper layers and it is no longer so easy to be who you believe you are.”

Renewed once every three years

The Dunkers Culture House renewed its certification last year. The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Rights (RFSL) and its edu-

certification arm led the work to get companies to renew their certificate every three years. At that stage, measures that have been put in place will be evaluated and new targets for the coming three years will be set. The re-certification also allows for the training of new staff.

“We don’t have a large staff turnover, but we must keep these issues alive. It is problematic to claim that the entire house is certified if most staff have not had training,” says Lewerentz.



The norm-creative group has a permanent point of order during each workplace meeting, a so-called APT, where bosses and staff meet regularly.

The management group’s agenda also includes norm creativity. This, says Gunilla Lewerentz, is about “practising what you preach” and not just settle at nice projects and keeping the Culture House open for all.

“We are good with pretty words and sometimes even with action, but I am not employed to do a job that looks good in the media and in the brochures – we should be here for our citizens, they are our first priority.”

Should mirror society

That is why one of the management group's goals is to broaden recruitment. Gunilla Lewerentz has worked in the culture sector for a long time, and says it is an exciting trade but that it lacks diversity.

“We have to take a closer look at all the grounds of discrimination when we hire people. This approach is not a quick fix but extremely long-term work,” she says, adding that this awareness of diversity exists already.

“Anyone we hire must support our values and must want to include all of the citizens in the city.”

Synergy effects with added value

Parallel to the long-term measures, the Dunkers Culture House maintains the gains of having invested in an LGBTI certificate, on a daily basis. The operations manager believes the certification has helped improve awareness among staff of how they meet visitors, shape the environment (the so-called lady and gentlemen toilet signs have been removed) and that they become more mindful of their own behaviour, thinking and actions.

“This is what constitutes our norm-creative way of thinking. Our competence has improved when it comes to respecting all human beings, and it has also helped us focus on how we use language. The certification has also opened our eyes to structural discrimination. For instance, funcophobia, how we treat people with functional variations,” says Gunilla Lewerentz.

Tora Schlyter points to the importance of the education which resulted from the certification, how knowledge



This is how nice Norra Hamnen in Helsingborg can be, where Dunker Culture House lies. The picture was taken before the Corona pandemic. Photo: Mickael Tannus.

Always on the agenda

To prevent what has been achieved with the certification from being forgotten, the Culture House has its own norm-creative group. It takes a norm-critically approach by analysing and trying to find solutions to problems that apply to LGBTI as well as human rights and children’s rights issues.

The group uses the seven grounds of discrimination which are covered by the Swedish law prohibiting discrimination: sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation and age.

Tora Schlyter is an exhibition pedagogue at Dunkers Culture House and responsible for the group. It has an intersectional perspective, which she believes is crucial to how things develop.

“It is absolutely essential when working with rights issues that we consider how things are linked, to avoid pitting groups against each other or developing perspective fatigue. This way of working is very clearly described in our mandate,” says Tora Schlyter.

strengthens staff's self-confidence, and quotes from the overall positive feedback: "I did not know this" and "I did not think about this".

Tolerance between staff themselves has also improved. If someone says or does something wrong, a colleague can correct them without anyone feeling guilty, says Tora Schlyter.

"Nobody should be afraid of being verbally reprimanded, it is possible to apologise when a mistake has been made.

"It is obvious that this is how things should be at our place. Even if not everyone knows the right words, we do try."



No Swedish OECD head – controversial Australian wins

Australian Mathias Cormann is the OECD's new Secretary-General after beating Swedish candidate Cecilia Malmström. It has been 14 years since a new leader was elected for the organisation, which is made up of 37 industrialised countries.

NEWS

23.03.2021

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM/ GREG BEADLE

Mathias Cormann was Australia's Minister for Finance between 2013 and 2020. He comes from the Liberal Party, which despite its name is a conservative party. He is controversial because of his reluctance to support climate change mitigation. He does not question the science as such but has been sceptical to emission-curbing measures.

Before his election, international environment groups wrote to the OECD expressing "grave concerns" over Cormann's candidacy, according to The Guardian. He takes over the OECD leadership in June and will serve five years.

The Pacific region increasingly important

Cormann's ascent also shows that the Pacific countries have become increasingly important to the global economy and the organisation, of which neither China nor Russia are members. Mathias Cormann's background is interesting – he was born in Belgium and emigrated to Australia in 1996. He speaks fluent French and has spent half of his life in Europe and half in Australia.

Ángel Gurría, the current OECD Secretary-General, is Mexican. Many had therefore hoped for a European candidate since 27 of the organisation's member states are in Europe. It has not been led by a European since 1996.

Under Mr Gurría the OECD, which is based in Chateau de la Muette in Paris, has taken a knowledge-based approach to the challenges facing the global economy. 3,000 economists, lawyers and researchers gather comparable statistics and write hundreds of reports every year. In addition to the annual country reports, which contain advice for what kind of economic policies countries should pursue, there are several other major reports – like the World Economic Outlook and the World Employment Outlook. The OECD under Gurría has also become an increasingly strong proponent of collective bargaining and social dialogue. It has explored new ways in which to measure welfare beyond only looking at a country's GDP.

Global Deal

One example of the latter was when the OECD in 2018 took on the responsibility for the Global Deal, launched by Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, Ángel Gurría and ILO leader Guy Ryder during a UN meeting in 2016.

The Global Deal is a global partnership working for social dialogue and better labour market conditions.

“The key message carried by the Global Deal is clear: Social dialogue has a critical role to play in reducing inequalities and in shaping the Future of Work,” said Ángel Gurría as the organisation took on the responsibility.

He also pointed to how increased inequality goes hand in hand with a fall in trade union membership and in collective bargaining coverage.

“Our Framework for Policy Action on Inclusive Growth highlights that creating new forms and spaces for social dialogue can go a long way in helping us achieve our objectives of decent work, quality jobs and inclusive growth,” said Gurría.



Finland and Sweden: one year, two cities, one closed border

In Sweden, the talk was about Finland “closing the border to Sweden”. In Finland, it was called “necessary domestic border controls”. It has been more than a year since the Corona pandemic changed everyday life in the most integrated region of the Nordics – the twin cities of Tornio and Haparanda.

NEWS

23.03.2021

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING ÖSTLING, PHOTO: CATA PORTIN

Freedom of movement in the Nordic region has been limited for more than a year. This freedom came particularly naturally to the Northern districts where borders have hardly been visible at all.

“But the border has never been completely closed,” points out first grade lieutenant Jari Rantala. If that were the case, the border region would look quite different. What has been

introduced is internal border controls, and movement is limited for foreign citizens.

He has seen the whole thing since the start in March 2020 and has been a border guard where twin cities Tornio and Haparanda are split in two. There are three border posts for the national border, most are on the E4 artery.



During the first few weeks, the number of border crossings fell dramatically to around 1,200 a day. When the border reopened a little bit more during the autumn, 20,000 people were crossing every day.

In normal times there can be more than 40,000 daily border crossings between Tornio and Haparanda.

Now that Sweden has introduced border controls too, border traffic has fallen by an estimated 90%.

“In the beginning, there was a lot of squabbling and grumpy people wanting to cross. This was completely understandable,” says Jari Rantala. But he understands that the Finnish government wanted to take rapid action.

Finnish citizens are free to leave Finland and to return. To begin with, this was not quite clear. Since then, the border authorities have faced criticism for failing to explain to travellers the difference between orders and recommendations.

“We have not stopped anyone here in Tornio, but we have sometimes questioned the necessity of certain journeys. Some people might have experienced this as a ban on entering the country,” says Rantala.



Finnish border authorities did not have the time or the opportunity to explain everybody's rights, according to Jari Rantala. Today, all Finns know their right to travel and re-

turn across Finland's borders. But border guards can still appeal to people's fear of transmission in order to prevent unnecessary journeys.

From sea to land borders

Finnish border guard Jari Rantala has worked for the coast guard along the entire Finnish west coast. The job is border control, but in normal times it is more about sea rescue and keeping an eye on leisure vessel activity in the summer.

The Finnish coast guard's pension system is generous with a low retirement age. People who start their career in the coast guard now, can retire at 57, but Rantala was able to retire at 52. That is why he could step in with a few days' notice when the Finnish government needed extra personnel along the border with Sweden.

For the past year, Rantala has been head of a weekly rota system and commutes from his home town further south in Finland. Many other border guards do the same for longer or shorter periods.

More than 600 Finnish border guards have now been staffing the temporary border posts in the north.

Some of them are retired personnel, but many have been moved here from other posts, especially from the Russian border. It has been closed on the Russian side and the need for Finnish border guards has been less than normal.



None of the guards who have served at this border control have contracted Covid 19. Rantala is somewhat surprised. The border traffic has been reduced, but it is still possible for Finnish border guards to meet thousands of travellers every day.

A very busy shopping centre on the border

The border crossings between Tornio and Haparanda are the busiest of all the six crossings into Sweden. As long as ice covers the Torne river, many unofficial crossings are taking place, and there are usually also some winter roads in operation.

The current recommendation is to cross the border only via the official posts. Preferably you should not cross at all.

Tornio's main shopping centre is called, somewhat fittingly, Rajalla – På gränsen (“On the border”). This is also a much calmer place than usual these days. It can be accessed from Sweden across bridges on either side of the building complex.

The border to Sweden runs right outside the shopping centre's doors. Crowd control barriers have been erected in the courtyard to mark the border. This is the road pedestrians and cyclists use to go to and from Sweden.

On the Swedish side, there is a newly built travel centre for both cities' citizens and several shopping centres. One of them houses a specialist shop for snus tobacco products, which are forbidden from sale in Finland.

There are people on both sides of the border who gladly cross over to shop. It feels cheaper, better or closer and it also offers a bit of change as you find different products in foreign shops.

But right now it is wise to settle for your own country's products, argues Jari Rantala. He tells us about a Swede who tried to convince border guards that he needed to go across to Finland to buy a comb.

Healthcare commute to avoid a catastrophe

Tiina Patokoski is one of those who commute daily between Tornio to her job in Kalix on the Swedish side. She has been a nurse there since 1998. Today, she heads the healthcare unit with some 30 staff.



At the beginning of the pandemic, Finland sought to completely close the border, but Sweden protested. It would not be possible to operate without healthcare staff from Finland, especially with the increased strain Corona patients put on intensive care.

Five of the 30 staff at Patokoski's unit in Kalix come from the Finnish side. Like her, they have a 50 kilometres daily commute to their work in Sweden. Haparanda would have seen an even larger shortfall in healthcare staff.

Sweden promised to organise tests and accommodation at the Swedish healthcare institutions for personnel who could still work but did not want to commute.

Tempting wages in border-less Meänmaa

The flow of commuters goes mainly from Finland to Sweden. Healthcare sector jobs are paid quite a bit better there, and working conditions are better too.

Patokoski enjoys her work both as a nurse and now also in her “career”. Kalix municipality is a good employer, she says. It has never occurred to her to change jobs to one in Finland.

“We who were born here in the border region don't even see a border. Now it has reemerged in quite a concrete way, but before that you never thought about it at all.”

There is not much waving of national flags either unless one country wins important ice hockey matches. This used to be one and the same country until 1809. People feel they come from Meänmaa – or Tornedalen in Swedish – first and foremost, and the mentality has never changed, says Tiina Patokoski.

A tough year with Corona 24/7

“It has been a tough year with the virus impacting on everything,” says Tiina Patokoski. She remembers the unease across all of Norrbotten County's health service in the beginning, which was already stretched. A closed border would have spelt catastrophe.

She could have worked partly online if the border really had been closed, but work on the wards can only be done where the wards are.

It was particularly hard at work in January, when the Coronavirus hit Kalix municipality's care homes. Care home deaths have become a national political issue in Sweden too, but Tiina Patokoski no longer has the energy to watch the news about Corona.

11 months later: Sweden closed the borders

It took a long time before Sweden closed the border in the same way as Finland had. But now job commuters need to provide new tests each week on the Swedish side of the border. There is, however, no need for healthcare staff to quarantine.

Healthcare staff and older citizens have had their Corona vaccines. The situation has calmed down in Kalix, but there is still infection in the population, says Tiina Patokoski.

The situation has varied. To begin with, Finland feared the widespread infection in Sweden. Then Tornio became one of the hardest-hit cities in Finland. Now the disease is found on both sides of the border, so a complete closure of the border would probably not change the situation.

Patokoski is very worried about the Coronavirus and the associated risks. Health authorities work hard to keep the virus from spreading on wards.

However, Swedish care homes allowed visitors for a long time, while in Finland the doors remained firmly shut to all outsiders and families. Face masks and visors were obligatory in Finnish institutions, not in Swedish ones.

The passport union and freedom of movement

The 1954 Nordic passport union has benefited both the labour market and business and has improved social contact and the lives of common people across the borders. In the north, joint cross-border measures have saved money. In Harparanda there is a shared fire and rescue station for both cities.

Only now, as the border is in focus and the freedom of movement has been limited, people realise how painless and borderless life in the north has been.

It is said this is the first time since 1995 that Sweden is monitoring the Finnish border. This monitoring could get tricky if it turns into a long-term thing. The region has few settlements and not many police. The police's new border duties could impact on their other tasks and crime prevention.

On the other hand, notes Jari Rantala, border monitoring and identity controls have led to more criminals being captured. That is the positive aspect of border checks, while the Schengen system offers other advantages.



More women in STEM jobs would benefit all of society

Could education or jobs be to blame for women and girls not choosing science, technology, engineering or mathematics – known as STEM – occupations? Or is it the women and girls themselves who need to change?

NEWS

23.03.2021

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

These pointed questions are explored in the report *Gender perspective on the high-tech future labour market*, commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers and written by NIKK - Nordic Information on Gender. The report has gone through 199 different research articles and complemented these with new information from national stakeholders in the Nordics, in order to find out how they try to influence gender-stereotypical STEM education choices.

What becomes clear is that the latter perspective dominates.

“Women are perceived as being the ones who should change since they are considered to lack self-belief, networks and experience. This is to a large degree about ‘fixing the women’

and less about ‘fixing the organisations’ or ‘fixing the knowledge’,” write the report’s two authors Ulrika Jansson and Jimmy Sand.

A focus on role models

The focus of the proposed measures is on role models, mentorships and networks as well as practical experience and aims at women.

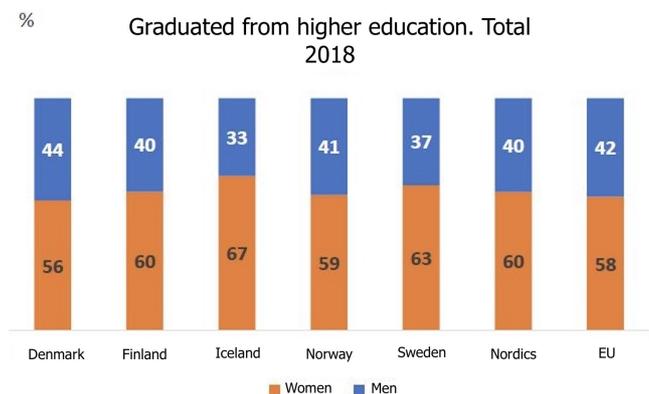
“To a large degree, the measures are about women helping other women by being role models or mentors. Certain measures probably help to get girls and women into educations and occupations that are traditionally male-dominated. Yet they probably do not challenge established privileges and

norms or lead to comprehensive changes to the everyday running of things and how work is organised.”

The report was initiated as the Nordic labour ministers met in Reykjavik in 2019. Analyses of the future of work show that digitalisation and automation will lead to the disappearance of certain traditional occupations. Meanwhile, there will be more STEM jobs. Women risk being hit by these developments and miss their chance to enter new occupations if there are no changes to existing inequalities.

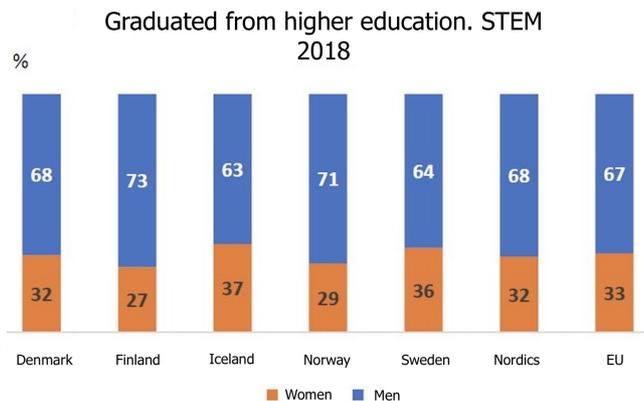
“I am a maths and physics teacher myself. I know that many girls are interested in these subjects. Yet many young people have a far too narrow understanding of what the subjects can lead to, and what you might actually end up working with,” said Sweden’s then Minister for Employment Ylva Johansson, as she explained the need to investigate what it is that is keeping girls and women away from STEM jobs.

Women in OECD countries generally have higher education than men, but the number of girls and women who study STEM subjects is still low. This is how it looks across all higher education:



The numbers in these graphs come from the Nordic Council of Ministers’ analysis department and the Nordic Statistics database. The information is from 2018 and comes from Eurostat.

But figures for STEM education look like this:



The statistics hide even bigger gaps. Within natural sciences, there is a high number of women in subjects related to biology and medicine. The number of men is even higher in computer sciences and in subjects related to mathematics and physics.

There is no “natural” explanation. Research shows that gender differences in skills are small, and girls also sometimes have the upper edge. Still, they do not seek further education within STEM occupations as much as boys do. This, in turn, has consequences.

“According to the European Institute for Gender Equality EIGE, the Union’s economic growth would increase by an additional €610-820m by 2050 if women were as active as men in STEM occupations, both because of increased productivity and bigger labour forces.”



Global initiative to strengthen social dialogue

The Corona pandemic has shown the importance of making quick decisions – but these also need public support. That is why social dialogue is so important. Global Deal, launched by Sweden together with the OECD and the ILO, is one of the few initiatives looking at social dialogue from an international perspective.

NEWS

23.03.2021

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: MAUD BERNOS/OECD

Global Deal was launched at a 2016 UN meeting by Sweden's Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, Angel Gurría and Guy Ryder, who head the OECD and the ILO respectively.

In 2018, the OECD took over the responsibility for the global partnership working for social dialogue and better labour market conditions globally. A secretariat at the OECD for Global Deal was also established.

“The strength of the Global Deal is that it is a broader cooperation than the two- or tripartite cooperation in the labour market, which is particularly important here in the Nordic region. It is a concept that also covers civil society, voluntary organisations, humanitarian assistance and many other groups,” says Laila Abdallah, Special Advisor for Global Deal at the Swedish Ministry of Employment.

112 partners

Global Deal currently has 112 partners ranging from countries, trade unions, companies and voluntary organisations. Partners are expected to support the underlying principles for social dialogue and to make commitments to promote social dialogue. Everything is voluntary and the initiative is not legally binding.

The initiative was recently extended by two years and will run until December 2022. During this time the Global Deal partners will focus on raising awareness of the initiative to attract more stakeholders, while also exploring ways of building capacity.

“The social dialogue, which the Nordics are known for, makes it possible to adapt faster to changing surroundings than if you have to go down the legal route, which often takes a very long time. This has been shown to be true not least during the Corona pandemic when it has been important to for instance adapt labour forces very quickly, like getting airline staff to work in the health sector,” says Laila Abdallah.



A good atmosphere between OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría and Sweden's Prime Minister Stefan Löfven during Global Deal's conference in February last year – before the Corona pandemic hit.

So far the initiative's strongest political support has come from Sweden and France. The question is what happens when the new OECD Secretary-General, Australian Mathias Cormann, takes over on 1 June.

“Both Angel Gurría and Guy Ryder at the ILO have been very engaged in the Global Deal. They have participated in several meetings and conferences in relation to the Global Deal, and I know that Mr Gurría has raised Global Deal in his conversations with various state leaders,” says Veronica Nilsson, head of the secretariat.

It is hardly a secret that Sweden's candidate for OECD Secretary-General, Cecilia Malmström, had been the favourite at the Swedish Ministry of Employment. That

would have made it easier to create attention for Global Deal.

Sweden's Minister for Foreign Trade Anna Hallberg heads the Global Deal steering committee, which also includes Gurría and Ryder.

Beyond the pandemic

Social dialogue is of course not something that is only needed to deal with the Corona pandemic. It is needed on all levels in order to meet the challenges associated with moving to a greener economy, the consequences of globalisation and many other issues. It is also needed because trade union power has been eroded.

“Falling trade union membership is a global trend and we also face major challenges that call for more social dialogue. The collective bargaining coverage rate within the OECD has fallen from 45% in 1985 to 32% in 2017,” points out Veronica Nilsson.

The partners in Global Deal share their social dialogue experiences. One example is how the Swedish state alcohol shops Systembolaget together with the Union trade union and the International Union of Food Workers, IUF, try to improve working conditions in South Africa's wine industry. South Africa is the most popular wine producer in Sweden.

The industry is split into many smaller vineyards, however. Trade unions often lack the necessary resources or organisational skills to talk to management on an equal footing.

Building capacity

“We have put a lot of work into building capacity going forward, and in March this year we launched what we call a ‘Global Deal Masterclass on Sound Industrial Relations’. This online course covers five subjects, such as grievance handling, how to perform collective bargaining and how social dialogue could be used in times of social crisis,” says Veronica Nilsson.

The other two topics are workplace cooperation and gender equality.

So what is the most important argument for joining Global Deal?

“By joining the Global Deal, partners send a strong signal that they share the ambition to achieve more social dialogue to deal with the challenges in the labour market, such as new technology, lack of decent work, and increasing inequalities. The Global Deal offers a platform to share experiences and good practices, where partners can learn from each other and have an exchange of ideas. The Global Deal also contributes with research and capacity building.”

Does Sweden sometimes underestimate how for social dialogue is in many countries?

“I believe there is great understanding in Sweden for the fact that conditions are different in other countries. But that is also why a global initiative is needed. No matter how much we cooperate in Sweden, it won't solve the global challenges.”



Norway: women engineers on the rise

Ingild Wang (24) has a master of technology from Norway's University of Science and Technology, NTNU. She believes role models and equal education opportunities have led to a good proportion of women among young engineers.

NEWS

22.03.2021

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJØRN LØNNUM ANDREAASEN

Wang's expertise is technical analysis within energy and the environment. She is an environmental advisor for the consultancy company Rambøll AS in Trondheim.

"The bulk of my work is assessing technical aspects of the lifespan of for instance a house. Should it be made from concrete or wood, which methods will result in the smallest climate footprint? We look at reducing CO₂ emissions to a minimum, but also things like over-fertilisation, water acidification and other nature and environment issues."

Not alone

Wang explains that women made up around 45% of all master of technology students during her time at NTNU.

"While I was studying there, extra 'female points' were removed. Before that, women got two extra points when they

applied to study technology. The number of female students fell a bit when these points disappeared, but I would say the gender balance is still pretty good. There are also many women in my department at Rambøll. So being a young woman here is not difficult.

"It took a long time before we had a female lecturer when I was a student. The differences have been extreme among the generations before us. This has probably not done recruitment to academia any favours, because representation is very important. You need role models to see what you can become," she says and adds that technology jobs do not seem to have been adapted to suit women over the years.

Nearly exclusively men

Wang uses hydroelectricity as a field with a heavy male dominance. One seminar she took part in was attended nearly exclusively by men between 50 and 60.

“There is a much larger proportion of women in my age group. This will be seen in the labour market as we begin to take over. Sometimes I attend meetings where everyone else is male. I can present economically challenging proposals for climate-related measures which are yet to match traditional measures on price. I don’t get far with this, but not because I am female. It is because climate issues are still relatively new. People don’t quite know how to put a price on nature and what it actually costs to destroy it,” she says.

Wang has considered her young age to be a challenge, but as long as she can back up what she is saying with professional expertise, no customers react badly.

“Jobs change as society changes. More women take technology educations and know different things and more things than previously. Society is better prepared for women, who still have to give birth. The number of women with technology educations in the generations before us has increased, so we get more role models. I also think women dare more and are encouraged to take the jobs they want to take,” says Wang.

The role models are there

Her own role model is Line Drange Ruud, head of power plants at Glitre Energi.

“Ruud is a proper happy-feminist. She is incredibly professionally competent and a real nerd, while she is also keen to attract more women to the energy sector. Ruud does everything in a positive way. There is no ‘beat the boys’ attitude,” says Wang.

“My university course, energy and environmental engineering, used to be called ‘high voltage technology’ and had very few women students. I think changing the name helped a little, but I don’t think it is necessary to adapt subjects or occupations to suit women. The important thing is that everyone gets an equal opportunity to take a higher education in technology.”

Both her parents have technology degrees. She has never been a stranger to choosing a technology education. Wang has always liked mathematics, physics and other sciences.



“I have always found it fun since way back when it was called natural sciences in school. I used to dismantle radios as a child to see how they worked. And I learned cosinus and sinus because my father drew and explained it to me while cross-country skiing. I attended technology camp for girls at NTNU in Trondheim when I was in upper secondary education. The camp was sponsored. I think such measures have been effective and they have been important. But special recruitment measures for girls will probably be less important with time,” believes Wang.

The increasing number of women studying, working with or teaching technology will lead to an automatic increase in recruitment, she believes.

Three bottom lines

Rambøll looks at sustainability through three bottom lines, we learn.

“Social, climate/environmental and economical sustainability. Rambøll is certified according to the UN’s 17 sustainability goals as the first consultancy firm in the world. We look at the environment and pollution, while my speciality is climate change.”

Wang explains that the environment focus also covers employees. They cycle to work, eat some vegan food and more. Externally they are pushing customers towards solutions that benefit the climate.

“It used to be just the environment department that worked with sustainability. Now everyone at Rambøll is expected to do so, regardless of which departments are involved in a project. We are not doing green-washing of anything for anyone. We are focused on pushing to see what is possible. As an environmental adviser, I mainly work on the environmental side of sustainability,” she says, adding that the environment and climate issues have been a hobby for a long time.

“When I was a student and started choosing subjects like industrial ecology, I realised that this could become my career. I have taken many technology subjects and got my specialisation. I have also looked at the links between politics and sustainability. Climate change is pretty complicated with many mechanisms that influence each other,” she says and concludes that the job can be pretty technical.

Minimum wages: ball back in EU Commission's court

The EU can adopt the European Commission's proposed directive on minimum wages – as long as one article is deleted or changed. That was the answer from the Council of Ministers' legal service after the Danish government requested a statement. The question now is what will be the Commission's next step.

NEWS

19.03.2021

TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG, EDITOR EU & ARBETSRÄTT

As the Nordic Labour Journal has reported earlier, Denmark and Sweden question whether the EU has so-called competence – i.e. the right to pass legislation – on minimum wages in the member states. They point to an article in the EU treaty that says the Union cannot adopt directives concerning "pay". This is the issue which the Council of Ministers' legal service now has investigated.

If you only read the conclusion at the end of the statement you might get the impression that the legal service has given a green light for adopting the directive as long as one article that goes too far is removed or changed. In reality, the statement contains several proposed changes and a veiled criticism which the Commission will likely have to address, at least partially.

Referring to EU Court case-law, the legal service observes that the EU cannot decide on the *level* of wages in member states, nor present conditions which would *interfere directly in the determination of pay*.

Inconsistent and contradictory

The statement also stresses that the proposal's wording is inconsistent and contradictory on several points. The aims and ambitions expressed in the directive's title and the so-called recitals in the directive's introduction do not fit with the content of the binding provisions. The way the legal service interprets the binding rules, the idea is not to order member states to actually introduce adequate minimum wages. The aim is only to dictate a procedure – how member states with statutory minimum wages will actually go about fixing these. In other words, this is about them making an effort, and not about what result they should arrive at, writes the legal service while suggesting that the proposed directive is adjusted to clarify this.

And as already mentioned, it also thinks one article goes beyond what the EU treaty allows and must be deleted or re-worked.

Reporting criticised

In passing, the legal service also presents a veiled criticism of how the proposed directive suggests that all member states each year should report to the Commission how they have succeeded in their efforts to promote adequate minimum wages. In a footnote, the legal service writes that its opinion does not address the question whether the proposed measures are proportional. However, it says, the member states' duty to monitor and gather data are very detailed. It is also not clear how these obligations would "ensure the effective protection of minimum wages" or an "effective implementation of this Directive" in light of the fact that the proposal only sets a framework for improving the adequacy and coverage of minimum wages, but does not oblige the member states to achieve a certain result.

If all the points made by the legal service are taken into consideration, the result is very watered-down compared to the ambitions which the Commission has expressed. The question now is how the Commission will act. If it presents a revised proposal, negotiations between the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament will follow. And in a resolution from February, the Parliament expressed ambitions that were at least as high as those of the Commission. The question of where exactly is the line for the EU's competence will then remain relevant for the duration of the negotiations.

If the text is changed substantially from the current proposal, further assessment may be necessary, the legal service points out.



Nordic equality: small annual changes but a long-term revolution

2020 became a bit of a gap year for gender equality, according to the Nordic Labour Journal barometer. It measures whether 24 positions of power in each of the Nordic countries are being held by a woman or man on 8 March. Like last year, women got 83 points. 100 points equals total equality.

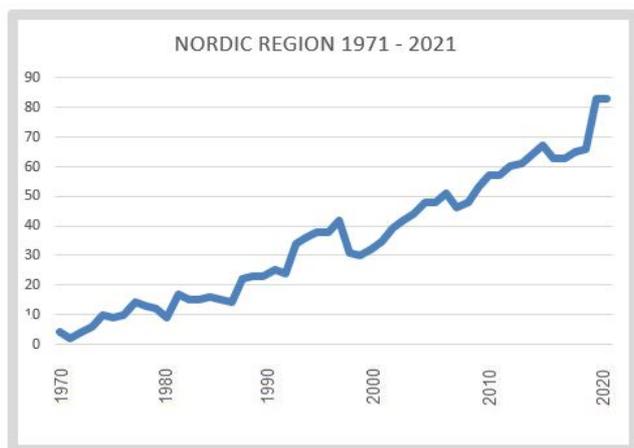
THEME

08.03.2021

TEXT AND GRAPHS: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: LEIF HØEL, NORSK FOLKEMUSEUM

It seems the Corona pandemic has helped maintain the status quo, more or less, in politics across the Nordics. There have been no elections in the past 12 months and few government reshuffles. There are also few new names in other positions of power.

This is the development across the Nordic region:



The NLJ's gender equality barometer shows the gender division across 24 different positions of power in each country. Each position gets between one and five points. 200 points are handed out altogether. This year, women get 81 points. 100 points would mean complete gender equality.

The biggest change was Susanna Gideonsson becoming LO leader in Sweden and Katri Kulmuni's retirement from her position as Minister of Finance in Finland. The LO Presidency carries four points in the barometer and finance ministers get three points.

These are the points for the whole of the Nordic region:

	Points	Change
Denmark	21	-
Finland	11	-3
Iceland	19	-
Norway	15	-
Sweden	17	+3
Total	83	-

In Sweden, the most recent government reshuffle happened on 5 February this year, when the Green Party's Isabella Lövin stepped down as Minister for the Environment. That means Sweden loses one point. This is more than compensated by Susanne Gideonsson's ascent to become Sweden's second female LO President on 15 June 2020.



Susanna Gideonsson (Photo: Björn Lindahl/Scanpix). Read our portrait of her here:

Sweden therefore gets an extra three points and reaches 17 points – the highest number ever for this country.

In Denmark, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's position remains safe. The only change in her government since she came to power on 27 June 2019 has been the retirement of Minister for Agriculture Mogens Jensen on 18 November 2020.

That came as a result of the decision to cull all the country's minks to reduce the risk of a Covid-19 mutation spreading from minks to humans. But the decision turned out to be illegal – a government minister can decide to cull sick animals but not healthy ones.

Minister for Development Rasmus Prehn became the new Minister for Agriculture, while Flemming Møller Mortensen took over the development portfolio.

At the same time, the Ministry of Environment was separated from the Ministry of Agriculture. Lea Hermelin was already a minister but now got her own ministry too. None of these changes changed the number of points, which at 21 is still the highest of the Nordics.

In Finland, Sanna Marin has been Prime Minister not quite as long as Frederiksen – she took the helm on 10 December 2019. On 9 June 2020, Matti Vanhanen took over as Minister of Finance after Katri Kulmuni. Finland therefore loses three points and ends up with 11.

In Iceland, Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir has been in power since 30 November 2017. There were no changes to her government in 2020, nor were there any in the other positions of power. As a result, Iceland ends on 19 points.

In Norway, Just a few days after 8 March 2020, the former leader of the Venstre party, Trine Skei Grande, left her government position. She had been the Minister of Culture for two years and Minister of Education for two months. Venstre's new leader, Guri Melby, became Minister of Education. This led to no changes to points in the barometer. Norway ended up with 15 points.

Year ten

This is the tenth year in a row we publish our gender equality barometer.

This year, the Nordic governments can celebrate 50 years of cooperation in the Nordic Council of Ministers. The decision to establish the Council was made during the Nordic Council’s session in Helsinki in February 1971. The agreement was signed by the five prime ministers – Hilmar Baunsgaard from Denmark, Ahti Karjalainen from Finland, Jóhann Hafstein from Iceland, Per Borten from Norway and Olof Palme from Sweden.

Across these five governments, there were only three women in the policy areas that are measured in our barometer: Danish Minister of Social Affairs Nathalie Lind, Finnish Minister of Social Affairs Anna-Liisa Tiekso (later Korpinen) and Icelandic Minister of Justice Auður Auðuns.

Here we delve deep into how gender equality has developed since the establishment of the Council of Ministers.

The cooperation does not include all government ministers, but there are ten permanent policy areas in addition to the prime ministers. There is also a council of ministers that deals with issues that are considered to be particularly topical. In 2017, for instance, there was a council of ministers for digitalisation.

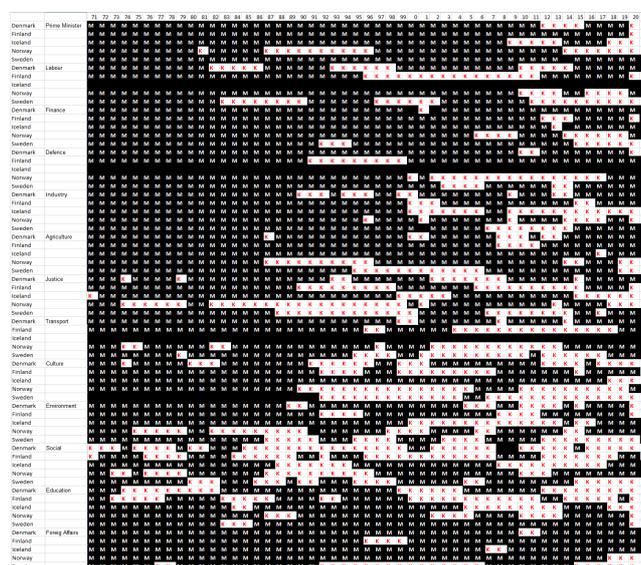
We measure the distribution of men and women in the councils of ministers, but we also include foreign and defence ministers. The latter are on their way into the Nordic cooperation after Finland and Sweden have been moving closer to Nato. We have not included the ministries of equality, since they are fairly new additions. In total, we look at 13 ministry posts, including the position of prime minister.

This year’s measurement includes 31 female government ministers. Because there are 13 positions in each country, we count 65 positions. The female share is now at 47.6%. The means only one or two changes of ministers are needed to reach full equality. (65 is an odd number, so we will never reach exactly 50%).

Four in five Nordic prime ministers are also women.

The result is less impressive if you look at the entire period between 1971 and 2021. If we count “a year’s work” for each minister post, there have been 50 x 65 = 3 250 years of work over these 50 years. Women have carried out 852 of these, or just over a quarter. (The total number of years of work is slightly lower because Iceland does not have a defence minister and because of some other issues).

Here is a graphic presentation of this:

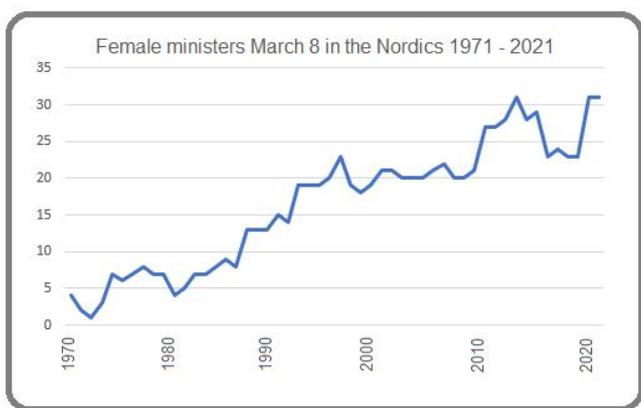


A black square with a white M means a man has held the position. A white square with a red K means a woman has been leading the government ministry. Completely black squares mean the minister post did not exist – like the defence minister post in Iceland – or that a ministry has been in charge of two policy areas which in other Nordic countries had their own ministries. You can view a larger version (on PCs) [here](#):

No female Swedish prime minister

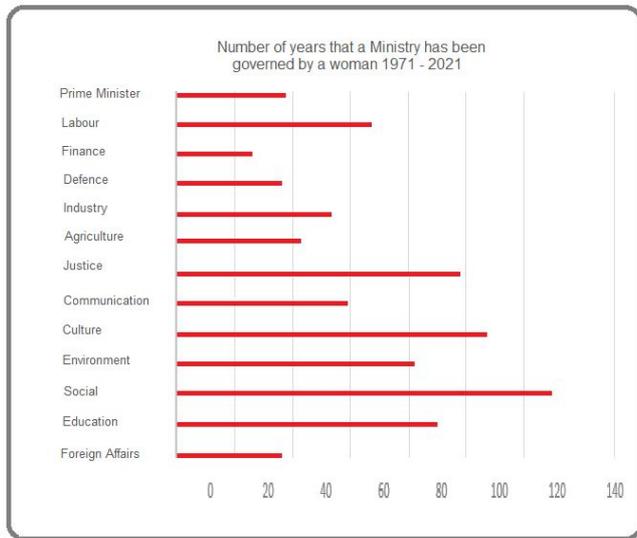
There are big differences between which ministry posts women have held. Sweden has yet to have its first female prime minister. The most common post held by women has been minister of social affairs. In 41 of the past 50 years, Denmark has had a female minister of social affairs on 8 March.

In total during this 50 year period, only the position as minister of social affairs has been held by women more often than by men. If you consider the five ministries of social affairs in



The graph shows the number of people, not points in the gender equality barometer. There are 5 x 13 = 65 positions. Full gender equality is reached at 32.5. This year, women reached 31.

the Nordics, they represent 250 years of work. 129 of these were carried out by a woman.



The ministry least likely to be run by a woman is the ministry of finance. Women have controlled these just over 10% of the time, or 26 out of the 250 years of work. Denmark and Iceland have had a female finance minister for less than one year in each country: Pia Gjellerup, 21 December 2000 to 27 November 2001 in Denmark and Katrín Júlíusdóttir 1 October 2012 to 23 May 2013 in Iceland.

Women have held these positions for the shortest amount of time: prime minister (37 years), foreign minister (36 years) and defence minister (36 years).

Positions women have held the longest, except in ministries of social affairs, are in culture (107), justice (98) and education (90).



International cooperation key to effective digitalisation

The Nordics are accelerating the digitalisation of society at least as fast as the rest of Europe. That brings advantages and challenges, according to Nordic and EU politicians who met for a webinar on digitalisation in early March.

NEWS

08.03.2021

TEXT: LARS BEVANGER, PHOTO: KARIN ODDNER

We have all been thrown headfirst into digitalisation over the past 12 months. Many are working from home using tools like Zoom, Teams and Google Meet while we shop online and our children sit in front of their screens during homeschooling.

The main aim with digitalisation is to improve people's lives and to reduce social inequalities. The Corona pandemic has highlighted both the opportunities and challenges we are facing. What have we learned and where do we go as citizens, societies and authorities?

National politics not enough

“Increasing digitalisation will have both positive and negative effects on people and society. It is highly dependent on what policies we implement in education, the labour market, consumer rights and more,” said Pyry Niemi.



Pyry Niemi. Photo: Magnus Fröderberg/norden.org

He is a Swedish Social Democrats MP and Chair of the Nordic Council's Committee on Growth and Development in the Nordic Region. Niemi believes that if we do not get our policies right we might end up with greater social inequalities between those who have access to digital tools and data and those who have not.

It is not enough to implement policies on a national or Nordic level – we need to cooperate on a European level, he argues.

“Our national systems need to be able to talk to each other. No country can implement effective policies alone. That is why the Nordic Council of Ministers has established a special council of ministers for digitalisation, in close cooperation with the Baltic states. That is also why the European Commission has made digitalisation one of its main priorities until 2024,” said Pyry Niemi.

Wants to challenge the tech giants

Several of the webinar's participants pointed to the fight between Facebook and Australia as an important example of why countries need to coordinate their digital strategies.

“Some tech giants even believe they are greater than states,” said Morten Løkkegaard from the Danish Venstre party. He is a member of the EU Parliament's Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes and works closely with the relationship between the EU and the tech giants.

“The recent power game between Facebook and Australia is an example in point.”

Facebook shut off access to news services on its platform in Australia when the country demanded the company pay the media whose content was shared there.

Løkkegaard argued the Nordics can play an important role in the fight against large, private tech companies.

“As a region, we have demonstrated an ability to reap the benefits of a more digital world while preserving our democratic values. The Nordics should have a strong voice in ad-

ressing and adjusting the direction of the EU, and I am sure that we will be able to do that if we continue this dialogue.”

An important role for the Nordic public sector

Finnish MEP Miapetra Kumpula-Natri also believes the Nordic region should and will play an important role in the digitalisation of Europe, especially within the public sector. Since 2019, she has been on a working group preparing the EU Parliament's “Digital Europe Programme”.

“We already have a very solid public sector, we are motivated and have the competencies to digitalise our public services,” she told the Nordic Labour Journal.



Miapetra Kumpula-Natri. Photo: miapetra.fi

“We also have the resources to educate people at work through life-long learning. And not least, in the Nordic we have a large degree of trust in institutions and civil servants,” said Kumpula-Natri, who believes this too will help in the transformation to digital solutions.

Preventing digital inequalities from growing

The webinar participants agreed that digitalisation represents enormous opportunities for the Nordic region and Europe, but several pointed out that more digitalisation has already led to growing inequalities.

“The education system is a good example of this, and we have seen this during lockdown when children and young people have been homeschooled,” pointed out Bertel Haarder, President for the Nordic Council in 2021. Haarder has also been Denmark's education minister several times and has spent 22 years in various ministerial roles.



Bertel Haarder. Photo: Björn Lindahl

“All the privileged children have really learned a lot during lockdown. But those who have been left behind have probably not. We also have a digital gap between students and teachers, where teachers don’t have the same competencies as students,” said Haarder.

Because the Nordic countries have so many things in common, it is very important to share our experiences from using digital tools during the pandemic, Haarder argued.

What happened when we closed the schools?

He was supported by Marianne Synnes Emblem, an MP for Norway’s Conservative party and a member of the Nordic Council’s Committee for Knowledge and Culture in the Nordic Region.

“The pandemic has thrown us into the digital world. A survey among principals in Sweden showed that remote learning had worked well for many, but that some students struggled – especially those with special needs or those facing challenging home environments. Also, not everyone has the Internet.”



Marianne Synnes Emblem. Photo: Johannes Jansson/norden.org

The Committee for Knowledge and Culture has now asked Nordic ministers to analyse the consequences of closing schools during the pandemic.

“Through collaboration and from learning from each other, the Nordics can take a lead in digital education. But the transformation must be done wisely,” concluded Synnes Emblem.