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Paulina Brandberg – the Minister for Equality who wants to take a tough stance

Mar 25, 2024

# Theme: Nordic gender equality and division



Newsletter from the Nordic Labour Journal 3/2024



Financed by  
Nordic Council of  
Ministers

## **NORDIC LABOUR JOURNAL**

Work Research Institute  
OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University,  
Postboks 4 St. Olavs plass, NO-0130  
Oslo

## **PUBLISHER**

Work Research Institute, OsloMet  
commissioned by the Nordic Council of  
Ministers.  
The Nordic Council of Ministers is not  
responsible for the content

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An email edition of the newsletter can  
be ordered free of charge from  
[www.nordiclabourjournal.org](http://www.nordiclabourjournal.org)

ISSN 1504-9019 tildelt: Nordic labour  
journal (online)



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# Who wants to hire young women and men with two children?

March is when gender equality usually takes centre stage. This year, the NLJ's gender equality barometer shows a setback for women's share of 24 power positions in the Nordic countries. But we also look at childbirth, artificial intelligence, the EU's platform directive, and Iceland's refugee policy.

EDITORIAL

25.03.2024

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The Nordic Labour Journal does not very often go back 500 years in time. We usually deal with the present. But at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, the big Nordbor exhibition is currently on show.

Thousands of objects from the museum's collections are presented using the latest technology to allow visitors to interact and be touched by the history they convey.

It is very well done. One of the 37 life stories you encounter is that of Catharina Forsberg (1736–1788), who (with the help of an actor and a screen) explains how she was trained as a midwife. She was chosen in part because she had "narrow, long hands that could save lives."

At about the same time, Sweden began to compile statistics on the number of children born per woman in Sweden. Until 1900, the figure was more than four children per woman, then it dropped rapidly. Last year, the figure was 1.45 children per woman – the lowest since 1749!

It made us wonder how assisted fertilisation could affect birth rates. Denmark has been a pioneering country in this area, thanks to liberal rules. But since 2021, Norway and Sweden have also allowed the use of donor eggs as part of assisted fertilisation. As a result, Denmark's largest private fertility clinic, popularly called "The Stork," has had less to do. A few weeks ago, the clinic closed down.

On its website, the clinic reassures women with frozen eggs and embryos that these have been taken care of by another clinic. Women today have the opportunity to freeze eggs as a kind of insurance policy against having problems getting pregnant later.

In the US, companies like Facebook and Google offer female employees the option to freeze eggs to have children later,

known as "social freezing." This might initially seem like a good measure to improve gender equality.

Men, after all, have long been able to freeze their sperm. The first child was born from frozen sperm back in 1953. But it took until 1999 for technology to develop to the point where children could be born from frozen eggs.

Such techniques are costly, however, and also involve considerable amounts of hormone treatment. It also creates a strange relationship with the employer. And there is no guarantee of having children.

"I have not heard of Danish employers paying for social freezing, and I hope that it is not happening because this is a really bad idea for healthy women, says Professor Lone Schmidt, one of Denmark's leading experts on fertility and assisted fertilisation. She has another dream:

"It would have an enormous impact on young people if employers signalled that they are very willing to hire young women and men with two small children."

Becoming a midwife was one of the first career opportunities that were available for women. Today, it is almost exclusively women who apply for that education. The NLJ has spoken to two men who have chosen that path.

"The atmosphere when the baby is born and the parents receive it is magical," says one of them, Henrik Lundius.

When we interviewed Paulina Brandberg, Sweden's Minister for Gender Equality and Deputy Minister for Working Life, she was more interested in divorces. Trying to reduce violence against women has always been high on the gender equality agenda. But now there is also talk of "economic violence."

“Economic violence is a way of controlling your partner through money. You might have relationships where the man takes out loans in the woman’s name so that she gets into a lot of debt. This in turn makes it very hard to find somewhere else to live.

“You also see examples of economic violence even after a relationship has ended. One problem I have dealt with often is very draw-out property disputes, when one partner resists so that the process might last for several years.”

We have also this year taken a look at who holds 24 different positions of power in the five Nordic countries. After three prominent women disappeared from their positions, there was a decline in gender equality for women.

We also study the consequences of the EU's platform directive finally coming into force, and we went to a seminar on artificial intelligence, where warnings were sounded not to believe that the EU's so-called AI Act solves all problems.

And finally, In Iceland, there is a heated debate about how many refugees the country can accept. Between 2018 and 2021, fewer than 900 people applied for asylum in Iceland. There was a big change in 2022 when 4,495 applied. The year after the number stood at 4,159.



# Severe drop in childbirth rates across the Nordics

What will happen to the Nordic labour market when birth rates in all of the five Nordic countries have fallen to record-low levels? Can existing assisted fertilisation technology help increase the number of children? Or is the drop in foreign adoptions larger?

THEME

25.03.2024

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

Discussing birth rates and adoptions in relation to the workforce can seem an abstract exercise. Many other factors influence the size of the workforce. Compared to migration, unemployment, sick leave, retirement age and the number of part-time workers, adoptions and fertility treatments do not matter that much.

It will also take up to 25 years before the children who are born today enter into the labour market, of course. But there are some other, more pressing consequences: New parents get parental leave and disappear from the labour market for a year.

Only a few years after Louise Brown became the first test-tube baby in 1978, Nordic couples struggling with infertility were able to undergo assisted fertilisation, which involved extracting an egg from the woman's body, fertilizing it, and then re-implanting it.

170,000 children have been born as a result of assisted fertilisation in the Nordic region, according to the Committee of Nordic Assisted Reproductive Technology and Safety CoNARTaS.

The register lists both children born from ART (assisted reproduction technology) and the 7,850,000 children who

were born without any assistance. The statistics run until 2015 and also include all mothers.

The most up-to-date statistics are found at the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology, ESHRE, however. They gather data from all of the European countries. These were the figures from five years ago, with a few gaps in the statistics, according to ESHRE:

	Number of tries	Children born through ART	2019	2018
Denmark	14,007	5,516	6.3%	
Finland	3,993	1,526		3.7%
Iceland	489	236		5.6%
Norway	7122	2076		
Sweden	12128	5448	4.7%	

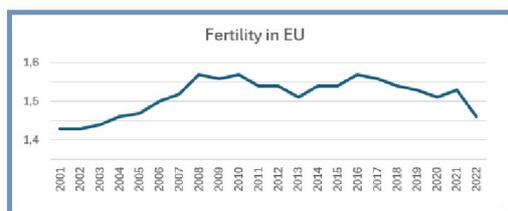
The statistics are from 2019 for Denmark, Norway and Sweden, and from 2018 for Finland and Iceland. The percentages compared with all births are missing for Norway. Source: ESHRE.

As the statistics shows, nearly 15,000 children are born in the Nordics as a result of assisted fertilisation per year.

The proportion looks set to rise. According to the World Health Organisation, 17.5 per cent of the world’s women and men struggle to conceive. The proportion is slightly higher in high-income countries compared to low-income ones.

Spain had the highest level of children born through assisted fertilisation in Europe in 2019, with 8.9 per cent.

One explanation for the falling fertility rates is that women wait longer to have children. The fall in fertility rates might not seem very dramatic. For the whole of the EU, the number of children born per woman has varied between 1.43 at the bottom and 1.57 at the top over the past 20 years.

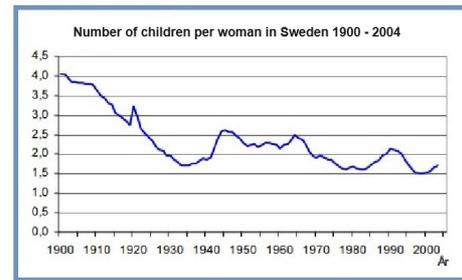


Fertility is measured in the number of live births per woman in a country. Source: Eurostat.

In a country with low child mortality rates, women need to have 2.1 children on average in order to maintain the country’s population level.

Historically, the most dramatic change occurred between the early 1900s, when Swedish women gave birth to four children on average, and the mid-1930s, when that number had fallen to 1.75. After that, things have gone a little up and down, but today’s level of 1.45 children per woman is the lowest since 1749 when the statistics started.

The lowest number of the Nordics, is in Finland, with 1.32 children per woman. In Denmark the number was 1.55 and in Iceland 1.59.



Source: SCB

It is the same story in the rest of the Nordic region. Fertility has fallen roughly equally in all the Nordic countries and across all educational groups, according to the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, FHI.

“This parallel reduction – even though these countries were hit in different ways of the ‘economic crisis’ and have seen different economic developments – could indicate that the fall in fertility rates does not depend on people’s economic situation,” writes FHI.

Improving families with children’s economy seems to have only a marginal effect on childbirth. South Korea has the lowest fertility rate in the world at 0.72 children per woman. The country has spent 270 billion dollars since 2006 to try to increase childbirth, without success.

In that situation, increased investment in assisted fertilisation may seem like a win-win measure. Childless individuals get their longed-after children and the state, in turn, gets new taxpayers (a couple of decades later).

But you also have to calculate what would have happened if there was no access to assisted fertilisation. Adoption used to be an alternative for childless people, mainly from abroad. But the number of international adoptions has fallen for various reasons.

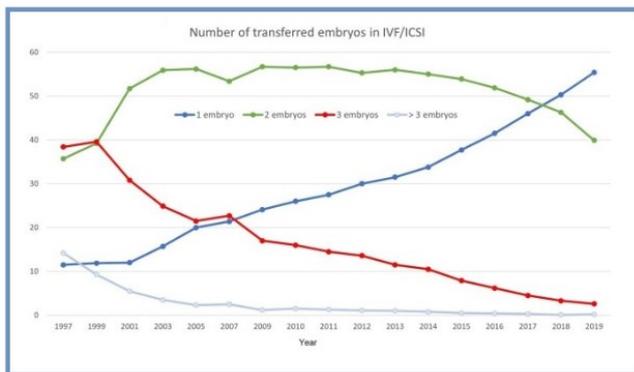
In the graph above we have compared international adoptions in Sweden and Norway. Around 1,000 children were adopted in Sweden and 600 in Norway every year in the 20 years between 1986 and 2006. Then the number falls rapidly.

In total, between 2006 and 2022, 3,377 children were adopted from abroad to Norway. If the level had stayed steady from before the adoptions started falling, 9,600 children would have been adopted to Norway.

Assisted fertilisation has therefore to a certain extent replaced adoptions. The technology has improved in many ways. But that does not mean the number of successful pregnancies has increased. On the contrary – it has fallen.

The explanation is that many doctors have stopped using the method of introducing multiple embryos during the IVF treatment. This used to increase the chances of pregnancy but also carried increased risks for both the fetuses and the women.

So today, only one embryo is usually introduced into the woman’s womb. In 2023, Iceland became the first country in Europe that saw no twin or triplet births at all as a result of fertility treatment. The statistics for twins and triplets look like this across the EU:



*The number of transferred embryos in EU. One embryo is becoming the norm, but as a result fewer babies are born. Source: ESHRE*

This has led to a stagnation and even a fall in the number of live births.

Nearly 50 years after the birth of Louise Brown, the first children born through assisted fertilisation will also start to retire. That is also the case, of course, for the large group of children who were adopted from abroad up until 2005.

After that, there will not be any temporary increases in the workforce for these two reasons. But then the question arises whether there will be more people born through assisted fertilisation who retire than there are new IVF children born.

Investing in assisted fertilisation to increase the workforce may have a marginal effect for a few years. But it is hardly a miracle cure – except for the fortunate parents.



## Danish expert: Support young people to get pregnant, not to freeze their eggs

Female employees in large American companies can have their eggs frozen and delay having children – as a workplace benefit. A leading Danish infertility expert recommends Nordic employers and governments take an opposite approach and support young people to have children while they are students or newly employed.

THEME

25.03.2024

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: GORM KALLESTAD/NTB

Danish expert: Support young people to get pregnant, not to freeze their eggs

Female employees in large American companies can have their eggs frozen and delay having children – as a workplace benefit. A leading Danish infertility expert recommends Nordic employers and governments take an opposite approach and support young people to have children while they are students or newly employed.

Infertility has become a serious public health issue in Denmark as well as in the other Nordics and globally. One in five face fertility problems and the fertility treatment market is

booming. But inequality, major costs and a range of physical discomforts are associated with fertility treatments, which is why they should not be the sole solution.

That is the assessment from Lone Schmidt, one of Denmark's leading infertility experts. She wants more fertility information aimed at young people and for them to be encouraged to have children early. Healthy women freezing their eggs for later use is something she describes as a "really bad" solution to the serious fertility challenges facing the world.

"Infertility is a widespread and serious public health issue across the world and also here in the Nordic region, and it

has major personal and societal consequences. The Nordic countries should make sure fertility treatment is not the only solution. Our region can benefit from doing a lot to get young people to start having children earlier,” says Lone Schmidt.



Lone Schmidt. Photo: University of Copenhagen.

She is a medical doctor and a professor with special responsibilities who has spent more than 30 years researching reduced fertility and public health at the Department of Public Health at the University of Copenhagen.

### **Nine in ten want two to three children**

Some of her research shows that 18-22 year-old Danish men and women have a great desire to have children. Nine in ten would very much like to become parents and gladly have two or three children. At the same time, young Danes want to be active in the labour market, and the Nordic welfare model creates a unique opportunity for both wishes to come true, the professor concludes.

“Nordic societies, unlike those in the rest of the world, give families a lot of support. It is possible to work while also being parents to small children. The Nordics offer paid parental leave for both men and women, good childcare options and the world’s highest employment rate for both fathers and mothers.”

Nevertheless, people in the Nordics have fewer children than they would like. They also have children relatively late and many need fertility treatment in order to get pregnant.

“Our research shows that there is a significant unmet desire among young adults in the Nordics to have more children, so we need to do something about the obstacles young adults experience in terms of having children earlier in life.”

Economy is not one of the obstacles. Young people in the Nordics do not have to wait to have children until after they have finished their education, like in most South European countries, explains Lone Schmidt.

### **Job and career first**

She and fellow researchers at the Department of Public Health have been investigating which obstacles young adults feel they have to overcome before trying for children. A large

majority say they first must find a partner to share the responsibility with, be in a stable relationship and feel mature enough to become parents.

More than four in ten also say they want to have a good economy, to have graduated, started a career and have access to a sufficiently large home before feeling ready to try to get pregnant.

“We see that many young people put off having children, which increases their risk of infertility. A large number of them become dependent on fertility treatments and typically get started on this so late that 70 per cent who have children as a result of fertility treatment are old, in a reproductive sense, when they become parents,” says Lone Schmidt.

### **Silent employers**

She wants to see a broad debate in the Nordic countries that can challenge the expectations young people have of themselves before they feel ready to try to conceive. She calls for the social partners to take an active part in the debate and to promise young people who have children early that they too are attractive employees.

“It would have an enormous impact on young people if employers signalled that they are very willing to hire young women and men with two small children. I and other infertility experts have been trying for the past 15 years to engage major labour market organisations in this matter, but there is a deafening silence from the social partners.”

Large international and American companies are also not helping facilitate the direction of travel Lone Schmidt is calling for. On the contrary. Google, Facebook, Twitter/X and others have in later years been offering female employees paid-for “social freezing”, which is the harvesting and freezing of eggs to allow them to have children at a later stage.

“I have not heard of Danish employers paying for social freezing, and I hope that it is not happening because this is a really bad idea for healthy women. Becoming pregnant later in life is more risky, and leaves the woman with the entire responsibility to create a family. That is not the way things are in the Nordic countries, where men parent as much as women.”

### **Many drawbacks**

Harvesting eggs also means two to three rounds of intensive hormone treatment, which places a heavy burden on the woman’s body, explains Lone Schmidt. The treatment costs nearly 60,000 Danish kroner (€8,000). On top of that come the costs of keeping the eggs frozen for years. These are not expenses that should be covered by public expenditure, believes Lone Schmidt.

“Studies also show that many of the women do not use their frozen eggs, which presumably is linked to the fact that they typically are in their mid-30s before choosing ‘social freezing’.”

Ideally, the eggs should be harvested when a woman is in her mid-to-late 20s, she explains.

“Having children late also puts major pressure on the body, and children of old parents don’t get the same amount of time with their parents and grandparents that previous generations enjoyed. All these consequences are not talked about, and I don’t think young people are aware of them.”

### **More knowledge about fertility**

She recommends a massive focus on information about fertility aimed at young people. In her opinion, young people know far too little about what helps and what reduces their ability to conceive.

The education system should also be even more parent-friendly, and the social partners should actively communicate and demonstrate in practice that young parents are attractive workforce candidates who do get recruited.

Lone Schmidt, who is now 65, started trying for children when she was 24. Only because she wanted to and she did not make any detailed plans. She sees how her young students today think it is nearly irresponsible for young people to have children just because they want to.

“I have taught university students for 20 years and see a new generation of students who are very focused on planning. They have extremely high expectations of themselves as parents. There is something new at play here.”

### **One in five have problems**

Difficulties in conceiving a child are a reality for every fifth Dane, according to the first survey in recent times of the prevalence of infertility in the population, which Lone Schmidt has helped create. The survey “Infertility – Thematic Report, Health Profile for the Capital Region and Municipalities 2021” was published in March 2024.

It concludes that infertility is a general social problem that all types of people face, but there are great discrepancies in who receives treatment. Ethnic Danes and people with higher education are far more likely to have fertility treatment than others.

The survey was commissioned by the public health authorities in greater Copenhagen – the Capital Region. Lars Gaardhøj (Social Democrats) is the head of the regional council at the Capital Region. He promises to follow up on the survey and do something about the discrepancies in treatment.

“The survey clearly shows that infertility is not only a personal problem for those who struggle to conceive, but that it is a problem for society.

“This touches all population groups and for me, it is important that the help we offer people in the region is extended to everyone so that treatment is not a question of where you live

or what your background is,” wrote Gaardhøj in a press release coinciding with the publication of the report.

### **Danish clinic bankrupt**

The Danish government has decided to double IVF treatment attempts from three to six and to make access to public health fertility treatments free also for child number two.

Denmark is already at the forefront as one of the countries in the world with the highest number of fertility treatments per capita.

Infertility levels are not higher in Denmark than in other high-income countries, but the country offers sufficient access to high-quality treatment – an opportunity that Norwegian and Swedish couples made use of before fertility treatment legislation in Norway and Sweden was liberalised in recent years.

The liberalisation meant Danish fertility clinics lost customers. One of the clinics, Danfert & Stork Fertility in Copenhagen, has gone bust because many of their customers were Swedes and Norwegians.

They stopped coming when treatment was made available in their home countries. The bankruptcy created uncertainty around what would happen to eggs that were already frozen. The bankruptcy estate writes on the Danfert & Stork website that the eggs have been securely moved to a different clinic.

# Midwife – a norm-breaking profession for Swedish men

The Swedish labour market is very gender segregated. But some go against the grain. Like the men choosing to become midwives.

THEME

25.03.2024

TEXT: FAYME ALM

“I was a little bit nervous on the first day of midwifery training, but when I walked into the classroom and saw another man, I was happy. I wasn’t alone,” says Henrik Lundius.

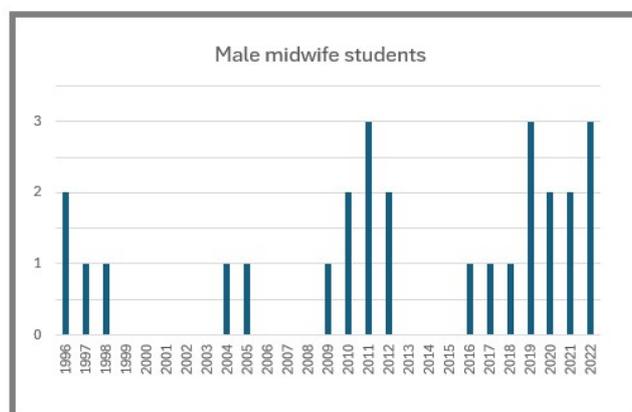
It is nearly a year since he graduated as a midwife. He financed the first semester of his education by working weekends at the paediatric emergency department and then through an education job which gave him a basic salary.



*Henrik Lundius, one of the few men who has become a midwife in the last years. Photo: private.*

He has never regretted his choice of specialist education even though he has faced some scepticism during his journey.

“When I studied to become a midwife five, six years ago, there were some teachers who expected that only women wanted to become midwives,” he tells the Nordic Labour Journal.



*In Sweden, between one and three male midwives have been trained per year since 1996. The training lasts two years. The statistics show those who started each semester, beginning in 1996-97. In total, between 136 and 387 midwives were examined during the same time period. Source: University Chancellor's Office.*

To become a licenced midwife in Sweden, you first have to be a licensed nurse. In total, the two courses take four-and-a-half years.

## Mistrust and privileges

When Henrik Lundius worked as an assistant nurse at a maternity ward the summer before he graduated as a nurse, some of his colleagues there did not believe a man would function on the ward.

“They expected me to spend most of my time at the reception desk, but they were wrong.”

But there were also low expectations which were easy to meet.

“Part of my job was to make sandwiches. Then I might hear: ‘God, you make such great sandwiches!’ So in some cases, it was not that hard to be good,” he says with a smile.

### Asking for female midwives

Today, he encounters no resistance or mistrust towards his professional choice. However, it does happen that the woman who is about to give birth requests a female midwife, although it does not happen very often, according to Henrik Lundius.

He works at Skåne University Hospital in Malmö, Sweden's third-largest city with residents from 186 different countries, according to the city's own website.

“No matter how you look at it, you do take such a request personally in a way. But on the other hand, I don't know what the woman has experienced and I cannot force her to accept my help. That would feel like an intrusion,” he says.

At a larger hospital like the one in Malmö, it might be possible to change to a female midwife, but if several births are going on at once this is not always possible.

“But with time I have learned to solve the situation by building a relationship before performing a vaginal examination. Once the woman is in labour, she has other things to worry about and afterwards, it feels especially nice – that things worked out even though I am a man,” he says.

### Unusual male support

There are several male doctors on Henrik Lundius' ward, an occupation he describes as being more medical and technical.

“The doctors come in when there are problems that must be solved. Being a midwife is far more intimate, it's a more feminine occupation. As a midwife, I must provide support in a tough situation. For the woman, it's about being able to receive the support that is both intimate and emotional from a man. It can feel unfamiliar,” he says.

He has no intention of changing to a more male-dominated sector. Henrik Lundius says he has a lot of fun with his female colleagues.

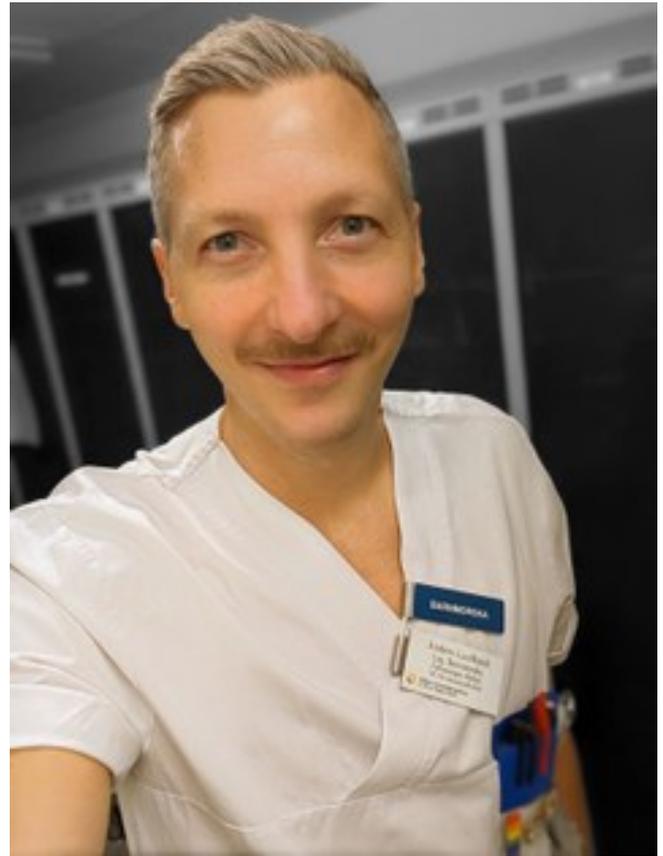
“It's an incredibly strong and fantastic professional group, not just the midwives but also the assistant nurses we work closely with. The atmosphere when the baby is born and the parents receive it is magical. But sometimes it's incredibly tough with a very high workload, and there are times I don't even have time to go to the bathroom for a whole night.”

### No longer “the only one”

Another thing Henrik Lundius is happy about is that he is no longer the only male midwife on the ward – something he actually was during his midwifery training. The man he had seen turned out to be a technician who was helping set up the projector.

A few months ago, Henrik Lundius got a male colleague who previously worked at Helsingborg Hospital. His name is An-

ders Lindbäck and the Nordic Labour Journal spoke to him too.



“I worked as a nurse at a youth clinic for several years and was very happy there. The reason I took midwifery training was to be able to perform gynaecological examinations and provide contraceptive counselling,” he says.

Although Anders Lindbäck was employed as a nurse by Region Skåne, one of Sweden's 21 regions responsible for healthcare, he did not receive any salary or financial support from them during the first semester of the midwifery program he attended in 2018.

“Then the rules changed, and for the remaining two semesters, I received a little over half of my salary, and I had to supplement it with loans from CSN (the Swedish Board of Student Finance). Now, thankfully, the financial compensation is better when pursuing a specialist education. Here in Region Skåne, you receive the full base salary,” he says.

### New dimensions as a nurse

Anders Lindbäck's plan was to return to the youth clinic after his studies, but the weeks he spent practicing at a maternity ward opened up a new world to him, he says.

“It was a world I had never before set foot in, and I discovered that it was fantastic.”

Like Henrik Lundius he occasionally meets women who ask for a female midwife, which he perceives to be for cultural

and religious reasons. When it is possible, a change can be arranged but that is not always achievable.

“There is sometimes a very high pressure on the maternity ward in Malmö, and this can make it difficult to change in the middle of a shift when other midwives are very busy. As a general rule, I don’t think it should be possible to change. Gender is a discriminatory factor,” says Anders Lindbäck, who also tells us that during his nursing training, he did not have any practical training related to pregnancy and child-birth.

“That made it difficult to figure out just how exciting this is. To be part of the moment when a child is born is wonderful. I want to be a reassuring presence and ensure that everything goes as smoothly as possible.”

# "Structures maintain the gender-segregated Nordic labour market"

“Men are underrepresented across the entire welfare sector, including healthcare, social care and education. Research shows that the reasons primarily lie on an organisational and structural level and that efforts to get more men to choose jobs in the welfare sector therefore must also be targeted at an organisational and structural level.”

NEWS

25.03.2024

TEXT: FAYME ALM

That is what Malin Allert tells the Nordic Labour Journal. She is an investigator at the Swedish Gender Equality Agency's department for analysis and evaluation.



Malin Allert. Photo: Private.

To reduce gender segregation in the labour market and counteract gendered study and career choices, the agency works from two perspectives:

- Firstly, by analyzing and monitoring developments in society in relation to gender equality policies. For example, by analyzing gender segregation in the labour market and in the education system – a quantitative perspective.
- Secondly, by examining the norms and values behind the numbers – a qualitative perspective.

“In Sweden, we have a very gender-segregated labour market. The majority of workers in the Swedish labour market are in an occupation that is dominated by one gender. Fewer than 20 per cent work in an occupation with an even gender distribution,” says Malin Allert and adds:

“But this is not the whole truth, because the even gender distribution is defined as a gender distribution of 40/60 and not 50/50.”

The agency has identified factors like salary, working hours and working environment as influencing people's choice of studies and work.

## Female work is low-status

The greatest obstacle to achieving a less gender-segregated labour market, according to the Gender Equality Agency, is that female-dominated work is undervalued. That becomes clear when you compare salaries to those in the equivalent male-dominated occupations, as well as the state of the working environment and how the work is organised.

“Gender marking of professions strongly influences gender segregation in the labour market. I believe that most of us have personal experience of how people think about their being female or male professions. The fact that women are still seen as suited for welfare jobs, for instance.

“This, in turn, makes the competencies and skills required to work in welfare professions invisible, which again means that men with care work skills do not seek employment there,” says Malin Allert.

## Choices, dropouts and changes

In addition to its core mission, the Gender Equality Agency has several other assignments. One of them is *Gender-bound study and career choices* which should “promote collaboration between authorities regarding gender-bound study and career choices, particularly focusing on assisting stakeholders in broadening their recruitment base and retaining existing employees.”

"Here we point to the importance of organisational and structural measures. We need to throw light on the organisations and structures that contribute to individuals choosing within a system that creates or maintains gender segregation between women and men," says Malin Allert.

She points out that study and career choices can be the result of a long chain of events and that efforts are needed along the entire path. From making the initial choice to starting an education, completing it, entering the job market, and staying in the profession.

"We see leaks. It is much more common for men to drop out of education and from welfare professions. But what we can also see, and what is interesting, is that there are shifts in the labour market, leading to reduced gender segregation. And it is primarily women who have been behind this change," says Malin Allert.



## Paulina Brandberg – the Minister for Equality who wants to take a tough stance

What can the Nordics bring to inspire other countries to improve gender equality? Sweden's Minister for Equality Paulina Brandberg has two rather surprising examples: High divorce numbers and changing tables in the gents.

NEWS

25.03.2024

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: MARCUS GUSTAFSSON

On 11 March, Paulina Brandberg will host the annual Nordic event in New York at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the UN's largest international conference on gender equality and women's rights.

Thousands of delegates gather at CSW every year and the Nordic governments' delegations include experts and voluntary organisations. This year's theme is women's economic independence and economic violence.

This is why Brandberg starts her meeting with the Nordic Labour Journal by saying she does not think rising divorce numbers are a negative thing.

"Over time, the number of divorces has risen a lot. We talk about this as if it were a negative thing. But I can see this as a positive sign.



*Paulina Brandberg worked at the Public Prosecutor's Office at the National Unit against International and Organized Crime between 2010 and 2022. She is also a former legal policy expert for the Liberals.*

“When we look at previous generations, it was far more common for the men to be the main breadwinners while women ran the households. For women of my grandparents’ generation, it was really difficult to break free from a relationship.

“Today, thankfully, more people are able to do so. Therefore, I can see rising divorce numbers as a positive trend – even if we of course would like to see people living happily together ever after.”

Paulina Brandberg’s name was a surprise when a centre-right three-party coalition was announced on 18 October – with support from the Sweden Democrats. She was working as a prosecutor and was known both for handling several high-profile cases of gang crime and for writing about the issue on social media. She belongs to the Liberal Party and is also the Deputy Minister of Working Life.

***Is being a government minister like you thought it would be, compared to being a prosecutor?***

“I’m not sure what I was expecting, because I didn’t think I was going to become a minister. But of course, there is a great difference. As a prosecutor, you are very close to people’s actual lives. As a politician, you work more on the bigger structural issues. Both jobs feel incredibly meaningful.

“What I find to be a big difference, and a frustrating one, is that politics move so slowly. There is so much you want to change, but it takes time. Working as a prosecutor, things move relatively fast. If you decide to detain a certain person, you can do it that afternoon. Politics don’t work like that.”

***Has any of your proposals been seen through the entire process yet?***

“Well, I wrote a criminal justice report for the Liberals during the election campaign, and parts of that report are now included in the Tidö Agreement.”

The Tidö Agreement is a deal on seven projects of collaboration between the government coalition partners the Moderates, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, with support from the Sweden Democrats. The name of the agreement is taken from the castle where the negotiations took place.



*Paulina Brandberg wants to value the interests of crime victims much more than has been the case before.*

Point three in the agreement centres on crime and gang crime, described as Sweden’s biggest social problem. But there is also proposed legislation in the area of gender equality.

“There are things in the Tidö Agreement that I am very pleased about, such as the change in legislation regarding restraining orders.

“Another part of the agreement is a shift that I consider to be absolutely necessary. We will now value the interests of crime victims much more than has been the case before.

***Wants to take action against perpetrators***

“One of the reasons I entered politics in the first place was that I felt so frustrated about the fact that we are too reluctant to take action against perpetrators.

“The result is that we have many crime victims in Sweden who are living with great insecurity and lack of freedom because they are afraid. Their lives are being limited by someone else. The state does not intervene to take charge and fix this.”

UN Women, the organisation’s entity for gender equality, has been fighting strongly against violence towards women. This has also been a so-called Spotlight project in the EU for seven years. 500 million euro has been spent in countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia to try to reduce the number of women who are victims of violence. But according to the European Court of Auditors, the measure has had limited impact.

One of the criticisms against the project is that far too much of the money was spent on UN bureaucracy. So how efficient

is UN Women, which is also funded by Sweden to work with these issues?

"I do think there is much left to do. There is also a very clear focus on carefully monitoring aid to different countries to make sure that it is not all eaten up by bureaucracy. It is important to weigh up where it will make more sense to give state-to-state support and where you will get more out of focusing support on civil society.

"This area is the responsibility of our Minister for International Development Cooperation, Johan Forsell, but I definitely believe there are many things we can do better when it comes to making sure that the money is making a real difference."

***During the foreign policy debate after Minister for Foreign Affairs Tobias Billström's foreign policy speech to Parliament on 14 February, it was pointed out seven times that Sweden has halved its support to UN Women. What is your comment?***

"We are still the world's second-largest donor to UN Women, which I think is worth keeping in mind. It is not down to Sweden alone to support UN Women. I think we should be clear that Sweden expects other countries to take more responsibility."

### **89 000 killed**

According to UN statistics, one in three women in the world have been victims of physical or sexual violence after the age of 15, and nearly 89,000 women were killed in 2022 in what is known as gender-related violence.

In Swedish politics, Paulina Brandberg has primarily been engaged with the issue of restraining order legislation.

"We need a change here, partly by introducing the new restraining order legislation, but also by introducing higher penalties for violent and sexual crimes.



*It is not allowed to take pictures directly into other people's homes, points out Paulina Brandberg's employees.*

"We want to see more detentions, and for the victims of crime to be taken into consideration when perpetrators are grant-

ed leave from prison, making it illegal for them to be near the homes and workplaces of the victims. This may seem obvious, but it is not the case today."

***In what way will the restraining order legislation be expanded?***

"The main rule today is that a restraining order only applies to a specific individual. There is no geographic area linked to the order. You might use what is called an expanded restraining order. In a best-case scenario, you might be able to designate a residential area as part of the restricted zone.

"What is now being proposed is to consider entire municipalities as restricted areas. This would give these vulnerable people a new level of freedom; they could for instance go and shop in a different part of the municipality or go to watch their children play football matches."

***Will these be restrictions that the person has to follow up on their own, or are we talking about some kind of digital monitoring?***

"It is also part of the proposal to increase the number of restraining orders with electronic tags. With one of those fitted, a signal goes to the police and the order becomes efficient on a completely different level."

***"Economic violence" is also a theme during CSW in New York. What does this entail?***

"Economic violence is a way of controlling your partner through money. You might have relationships where the man takes out loans in the woman's name so that she gets into a lot of debt. This in turn makes it very hard to find somewhere else to live.

"It is a way to control the other person. This, sadly, is more common than you might think. You also see examples of economic violence even after a relationship has ended.

"One problem I have dealt with often is very draw-out property disputes, when one partner resits so that the process might last for several years. In the end, the economically weaker party – most often the woman – can no longer defend their right because the judicial process to win what is owed to them is too costly."

***So your advice to young couples would be not to have a shared economy?***

"I wouldn't say that. But I would say that no matter how much in love you are and how convinced you are that you will live together for the rest of your lives, you must have a plan for your finances if things don't work out."

***Is this a message that is hard to sell in Catholic or Muslim countries?***

“It can be in countries where divorce is more commonly seen as a betrayal or a failure. There can also be religious aspects linked to a divorce. It can be very taboo even to discuss the possibility of divorce at some stage in the future.

“When marriage is fresh, it is particularly difficult, and it might ruin the mood, to talk about divorce already. But I wish more people thought along those lines. Even if it is not romantic and even if it is the last thing you want to talk about before a wedding, it is necessary to think along those lines to maintain your economic independence.”

“This is visible in many ways in Sweden, like the fact that you find changing tables not only in women’s toilets. It permeates Swedish society and I hope that other countries can be inspired by this,” says Paulina Brandberg.



*Paulina Brandberg was born in 1983. She lives in Stockholm, is married and has two children.*

Finally, Paulina Brandberg points out another issue which sets the Nordics apart from many other countries when it comes to gender equality: the fact that men play a bigger parenting role.

“Gender-equal parenting is key to economic growth. In Sweden, we have a relatively small gender pay gap, until a family has children. Then, the man often pulls away on the pay scale. That is why I believe it is important to talk about the value of gender-equal parenting. We also need to talk about it beyond an economic perspective.

“We must never assume that the person who stays at home with the child has drawn the shorter straw. We ought to highlight the advantages of having both mother and father as active parents. This way we improve gender equality not only economically but also within families.

“I would argue that fathers who do not have the same close relationship with their children as the mother are at a disadvantage. This is equality that we need to work on.

“Many in Sweden see it as natural for fathers to stay at home with their children, unlike in many other countries. We do still have much to do, but we are far ahead of other countries. This is an important issue that I gladly highlight in international settings.



## 2024 Equality barometer: Three significant women have disappeared from power

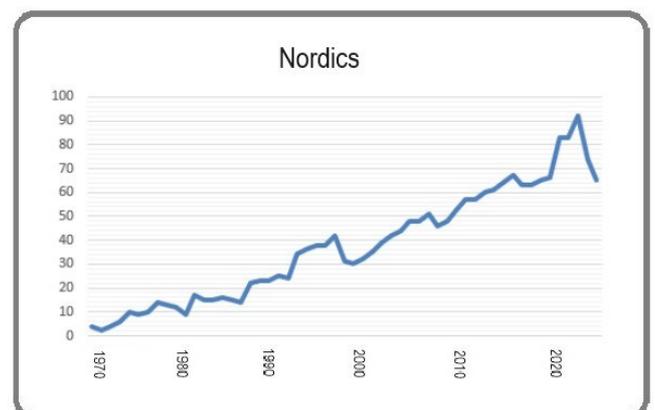
Two years ago, it looked like the 24 positions of power in the NLJ's gender equality barometer were just a few years away from being equally divided between men and women. Women had reached 92 points, and at 100 they would be on par with men. But in 2023, women's points fell to 72 and this year sees a further fall down to 65 points.

THEME

25.03.2024

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL

What has happened? The biggest changes to the barometer in the past year are due to Finland's Prime Minister Sanna Marin leaving office on 20 June 2023 when a new coalition was formed after parliamentary elections, and two strong women in Denmark choosing to abdicate: Queen Margrethe of Denmark on 14 Januar 2024 and the head of Denmark's Trade Union Confederation FH, Lizette Risgaard, on 30 April 2023.



The way the Barometer works means a prime minister gets 5 points, trade union confederation leaders get 4 and heads of state get 3 points. These three women alone represented 12 points.

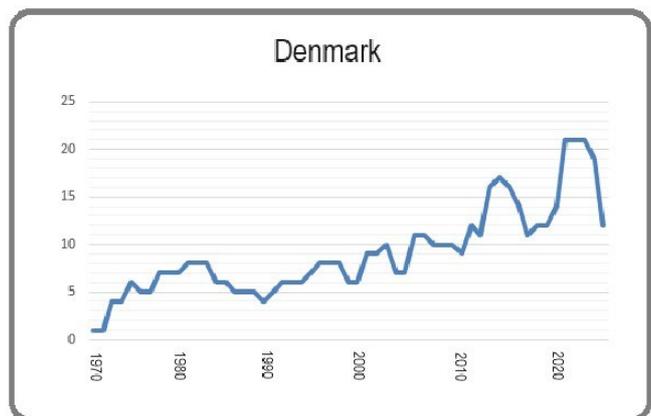


There are many ways to measure power. All the group leaders for the political parties in the Norwegian Parliament are now women. This has never happened before, the Storting pointed out in a press release on 8 March. Photo: Stortinget

Several government ministers in Jonas Gahr Støre’s Norwegian government were forced to step down after political scandals, and this hit more women than men. Another scandal led to certain changes in Icelandic politics.

**Here is a country-by-country overview:**

**Denmark**



The country is still run by a female Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, but for the first time since the Nordic cooperation was initiated in the 70s there is a male regent, Frederik X. Queen Margrethe ascended the throne on 14 January 1972, not long after the Nordic Council of Ministers had been established the year before. For 52 years, she has secured Denmark 3 points every year in the gender equality barometer.

How relevant is it to have a queen in a barometer that mainly focuses on political positions? The answer is that political decisions have decided who should be the heir to the throne in all of the three Scandinavian countries.



King Frederik X and Queen Mary in an official photo. For the first time in 52 years, Denmark has a male head of state. Photo: Stine Heilmann.

The Danish constitution was changed to allow Margrethe, the oldest of Frederik IX’s three daughters, to ascend the throne. Sweden and Norway changed their constitutions too. Sweden’s Crown Princess Victoria is the oldest of the siblings. Yet since the constitutional change took place after her younger brother Carl Philip was born, Sweden’s King Carl XIV Gustav has never reconciled with the fact that his son lost his status as Crown Prince and heir to the throne.

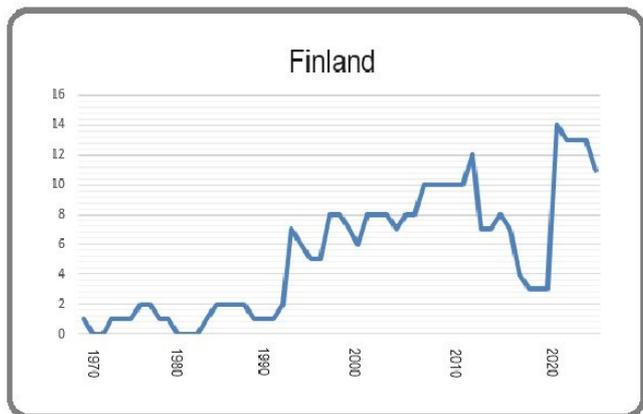
That did not happen in Norway, where Crown Prince Haakon is younger than his sister but politicians decided that female succession should not apply to the current generation.

Lizette Risgaard stepped down as leader of the Danish Trade Union Confederation FH after being accused of sexually harassing male colleagues. FH came out of a merger between Danish LO and the Confederation of Professionals in Denmark FTF, and this has created a bit of a headache for the gender equality barometer.

Since the LO’s Lizette Risgaard and FTF’s former leader Bente Sorgenfrey both entered the leadership team at FH, the organisation was for a few years granted 6 points in the barometer – 4 and 2 points to the two women. Then, Bente Sorgenfrey quit in 2022 and was replaced by Morten Skov Christiansen, who one year later also took over the FH Presidency.

What happens next will determine how to apply points when FH once more get a female leader – whether it is justified to give 6 points to that person or whether the trade union landscape has changed.

**Finland**



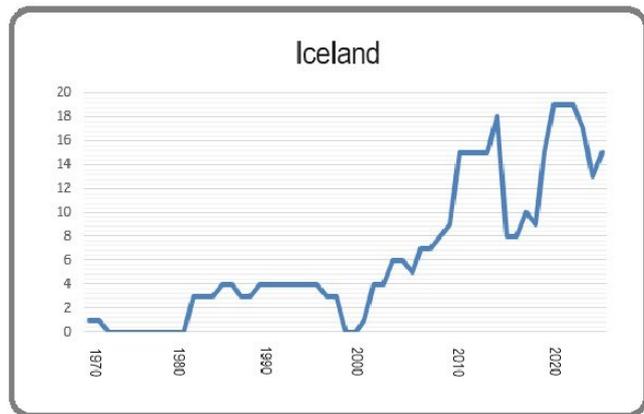
There is no problem figuring out how to divide points to the social partners in Finland. So far, no woman has been the leader of either trade union confederations or employers' organisations. So as before – nil points.

During her time as Prime Minister, Sanna Marin became the new face of Finland. She became the world's youngest prime minister when she took over from Antti Rinne in 2019. The year after, she also became leader of the Social Democratic Party. She surrounded herself with many other young female government ministers but alienated some Finnish voters after a party video featuring her was spread online. She chose to do a test to prove she had not used cocaine.

The current Prime Minister, Petteri Orop, is from the National Coalition Party – Finland's conservative party. The government coalition is made up of 19 ministers. Eight from the National Coalition Party, seven from the Finns Party, two from the Swedish People's Party and one from the Christian Democrats. The government came to power on 20 June 2023.

Despite the post of prime minister carrying significant weight with 5 points in the gender equality barometer, the loss of Sanna Marin has been partially compensated by women in other minister posts, leaving Finland 3 points down from last year.

**Iceland**

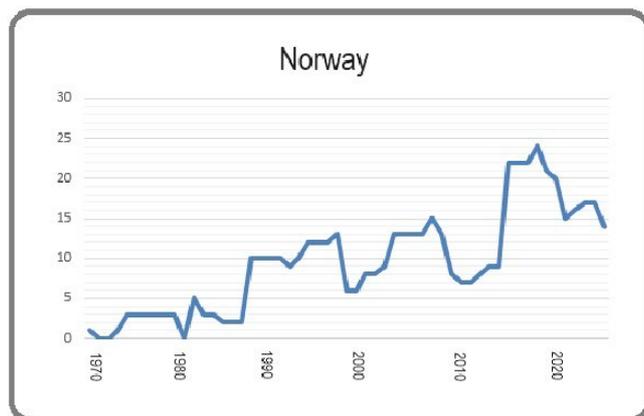


Iceland and Sweden are the only countries to gain points this year. Iceland gets 14 points - up from 12 in 2023. The reason is that the Minister of Finance Bjarni Benediktsson resigned on 10 October 2023, following the release of a report by the Ombudsman of Althing which heavily condemned his conduct relating to the sale of state-owned shares in the bank Íslandsbanki.

But since he is the party leader of Iceland's conservative Independence Party, he plays a key role in keeping Katrín Jakobsdóttir's coalition together. So she wanted to keep him in the government and made him Minister for Foreign Affairs instead while Thórdís Kolbrún Gylfadóttir took over as Minister of Finance.

That gives Iceland one extra point in the barometer. There was also a change at the top of the Ministry of Justice, where Guðrún Hafsteinsdóttir took over – but there was no political scandal behind this move.

**Norway**

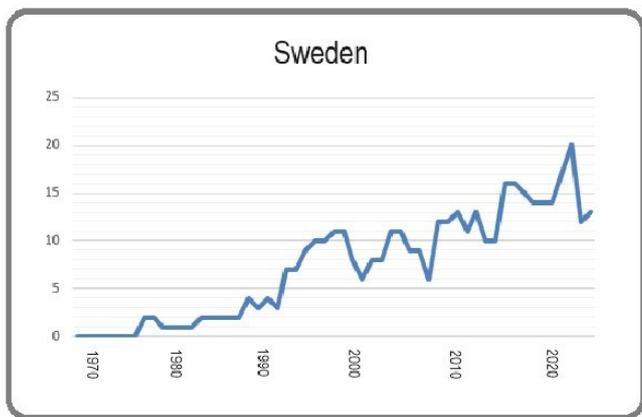


The Norwegians have previously shown that the gender distribution in the 24 positions of power can be in favour of women. The 100 female points are distributed with 40 to each country, and under Prime Minister Erna Solberg, Norway received 22 points as early as 2014. Ten years later, the country is down to 14 points.

Norway’s LO has been led by Peggy Hessen Følsvik since her predecessor Hans-Christian Gabrielsen died from a heart attack on 9 March 2021. That is one of the reasons why the barometer is based on measurements made at 8 am on 8 March. After taking the helm as caretaker, Følsvik was formally elected President at the LO annual conference in 2022.

Norway’s political scene has been through turbulent times lately, and many government ministers have been caught in the crosswinds. Norway’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Anniken Huitfeldt stepped down after her husband bought shares in a Norwegian state-controlled defence contractor. Other ministers were caught having cheated on their university master's degree theses and some had given well-paid boardroom positions to friends. Altogether, Norway lost 3 points due to this.

**Sweden**



There have only been modest changes to positions of power in Sweden. On 1 December 2023, the country got its first-ever female national police chief. Her name is Petra Lundh and she has previously served as Prosecutor General and as President of the Svea Court of Appeal.

The Aftonbladet newspaper congratulated her on her position by writing she had been given “the most hopeless task in Sweden”. Due to an ongoing conflict between different criminal gangs, there have been more murders and bomb attacks in Sweden than in any other European country.



*Petra Lundh, the new national police chief in Sweden. Photo: Nadine Sohler/Regeringskansliet.*

Swedish LO is facing changes at the top after Susanna Gideonsson announced she will be stepping down this spring. It is still not clear who will take over. Gideonsson is retiring for personal reasons.

“The simple reason is that 2023 was a shit year for me personally,” she told the Dagens Nyheter newspaper.

There are no changes to political posts, but when the Nordic Labour Journal interviewed the Minister of Equality Paulina Brandberg, we also asked her about how important it is to have gender equality at the top.

“It is incredibly important, but I have always been against gender quotas because I don’t believe that is the right way to achieve gender equality. We have to find other ways. Role models play a very important part if we want to get women into top positions. Women need to feel that it is possible. High-level executive positions are just as natural for women as they are for men. And this, of course, affects how many men and women are in top positions,” said Paulina Brandberg.

# Major increase in applications: Iceland's government seeks tighter immigration rules

There have been strong and frequent discussions about a change in the immigration system in Iceland in recent years. The reason is a huge increase in asylum applications which has proved very costly for the Icelandic state.

NEWS

25.03.2024

TEXT: HALLGRÍMUR INDRÍÐASON

There were fewer than 900 asylum applications in Iceland between 2018 and 2021. In 2022 there was a huge change. That year saw 4,495 applications and in 2023 there were 4,159.

77 per cent of the 2023 applications were people from Ukraine and Venezuela, and these were the main cause of the increase. Proportionally, this is the highest number of asylum applications out of all the Nordic countries.

The number of Ukrainian applicants is understandable, timed right after Russia's invasion. The increase in Venezuelan applications started in 2019 when the directorate of immigration opened up for asylum for people from there because of the dire economic situation in the South American country.

The situation in Venezuela was reevaluated in November 2022 and found to have changed for the better. In 2023, hundreds of applications from Venezuela were declined.

## “Spinning out of control”

In October 2022, Jon Gunnarsson, then the Minister of Justice, told parliament that tougher immigration rules were necessary because of the huge increase.

“We can't let this spin out of control like that. We actually have lighter rules here for asylum seekers than our neighbouring countries, which means that more people are drawn here proportionally than elsewhere.

“That's because our legal environment is not comparable to the countries we are comparing ourselves to in Europe,” he said.

He explained that by saying that the term “further protection,” which applies to people who are not considered refugees according to the law but who are likely to be persecuted or tortured in their homeland, gives better protection than in neighbouring countries.

There are also no reception centres in Iceland for those waiting for their applications to be processed so applicants go straight into the community.

The government has also pointed out that there has been a big increase in asylum applications from those who already have protection in another country. That can mainly be explained by two details in Iceland's current legislation.

Firstly, the authorities are obliged to process applications from people who already have protection elsewhere if the applicant has a special connection to the country, or other reasons recommend it.

Secondly, the authorities are obliged to process an application if 12 months have passed since it was sent. Because the number of applications has gone up, more of them have not been reviewed within twelve months. And since these have to be processed, they put further strain on the asylum system.

The government has pointed out the increased cost this has caused for the state. The asylum seekers have the right to food and shelter while they wait for the result of their application, and each application also takes a longer time to process.

With all that in mind, Gunnarsson put forward draft legislation which was meant to change all this, but it failed to secure the necessary support. His successor, Guðrún Hafsteinsdóttir, who took over as Minister of Justice last year, has now sent her own draft to parliament after getting it consented to by the government.

In an article on visir.is she says:

“Icelandic society is facing bigger challenges due to the rapid increase in asylum applications. The number of applications has increased by 3,700 per cent in just over a decade and has

caused significant costs for the state – about 20 billion ISK in 2023 – as well as a strain on all our infrastructure.”

And in reaction to this, the draft suggests a few changes in the immigration law.

### **Tougher rules on protection**

Firstly, exceptions for when not to assess the applications are removed - which simply means the conditions for assessing it will be tighter.

For example, a special connection to the country will not be sufficient to assess the application as it is now. According to the analysis of the draft, no exceptions like these can be found in other Nordic countries' immigration legislation.

Secondly, the family of an individual who is granted asylum and then a residence permit, will not be eligible for family reunification until two years later, and then only if the permit of the individual has been renewed. This is similar to what Denmark does.

Thirdly, the validation time for first residence permits will be shortened from four years to two or three. This is more in line with other Nordic countries, according to the government.

In the statement accompanying the bill, the government says that the asylum system is an emergency system and it is important that those in real need of protection get their application processed quickly and efficiently.

“It is important that the procedure is not delayed due to the heavy burden on the administration when processing the cases of applicants who have already received asylum in another European country.

“The high percentage of applications for protection from people who have already received protection in another state reduces the efficiency of the administration. As a general rule, the vast majority of such applications are refused, or almost 90 per cent in 2022, and therefore such applications cause increased strain in the system without delivering the desired results by granting protection, additional protection or a residence permit based on humanitarian considerations.”

It's still unclear how this draft will fare, but it is more likely to pass before parliament than previous drafts. The Judicial Affairs and Education Committee still has to review it and after that, it should be clear whether the draft goes through.



## AI – a threat to Nordic democracy?

How will artificial intelligence influence democracy? That was the big question during the marking of Nordic Day in Oslo. Do not think the EU's AI Act will solve all our problems, the warning went.

NEWS

25.03.2024

TEXT AND PHOTO: LINE SCHEISTRØEN

Nordic Day was marked in Oslo with an event focusing on artificial intelligence and democracy. The seminar was a collaboration between the Norwegian parliament, the University of Oslo and the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The question was: What does the technological revolution we are facing mean for our democracies? What can the Nordic countries gain from working together on these issues? How do we face new challenges and how do we use artificial intelligence to strengthen our societies?

### **The Nordic region can contribute**

During a meeting in Oslo in October last year, the Nordic Council of Ministers set up a working group to look at AI's impact on democracy.

“The Nordic countries play a special part here because our societies are built on social cohesion, transparency and strong democratic traditions. That's why we have decided to establish a working group which will look at the concerns we all share when it comes to how new technology can influence the democratic conversation,” said Iceland's Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir at that time.



*Gry Hasselbalch (left) from the DataEthics.eu think tank, with moderator Eirin Larsen, head of social media at Dagens Næringsliv.*

Co-founder of the DataEthics.eu think tank Gry Hasselbalch is a member of the Nordic working group that will provide recommendations on ethics and AI for Nordic authorities.

Hasselbalch has also been advising the EU during its development of the new AI regulations. The aim is to introduce common rules and a legal framework for artificial intelligence.

Hasselbalch participated in the panel debate at the Oslo seminar. She underlined that the EU regulations will have a big impact but that the Nordic region also can contribute a lot.

“The Nordic region is in a good position. It has established a reputation as a region that develops technology and industry that address some of the challenges we are facing,” said Hasselbalch.

### **Level playing field**

Norway’s Minister of Digitalisation and Public Governance Karianne Tung (Labour) believes in combining the EU regulations and Norwegian legislation.

“The EU is creating a good framework, but the Norwegian legal system is also well equipped for the use of artificial intelligence. Our laws are by and large technology neutral,” said Tung.

She underlined that the government will work rapidly to implement the EU regulations as soon as possible.

“I believe it is also important to regulate in order to create room for innovation. Regulations set out good rules for what is allowed and what is not. For businesses and others in Norway it is important to be on a level playing field with the rest of Europe,” said Tung.

### **Warned against being naive**

Nikolai Astrup from the Norwegian Conservative Party was Norway’s first Minister of Digitalisation between 2019 and 2020. Today he is an opposition MP.

Late last autumn, the Conservatives launched a plan for artificial intelligence. The party presented a long list of measures aimed at making sure AI will be used in a safe and valuable way.

Astrup underlined that AI presents both challenges and opportunities. It already has a role within the health sector and in industry, amongst other things.

“Nordic industry has the chance for instance to take the lead on industrial applications of artificial intelligence,” he argues.



*Head of the Norwegian parliament's delegation to the Nordic Council Helge Orten ( Conservatives) and Minister for Nordic Cooperation Anne Beathe Tvinneheim (Centre Party) hosted the seminar in the Norwegian parliament.*

He strongly supports cooperation within the Nordic region, but also in Europe. He is in favour of the most effective implementation possible of the EU’s AI Act. At the same time, he had this warning: We must not believe we can regulate away all the challenges that come with artificial intelligence.

“When every one of us, no matter where we are in the world, can start using this, we have a gigantic challenge,” he said.

According to Astrup, it would be naive to believe that nobody will try to influence things like elections, also in the Nordics, when we see that this has been happening in other countries.

### **Cannot regulate everything**

Petter Bae Brandtzæg is a professor in media innovation, linked to the University of Oslo and SINTEF. He warned against believing that the EU’s AI Act will solve all challenges linked to artificial intelligence. He encourages new thinking and more innovation.

“Rather than introducing a heap of restrictions, we need to create good verification tools,” argued Bae Brandtzæg. He believes it is important that we can still live in a well-functioning democracy.

“We have to keep having an open society where everybody can be in dialogue even though we have AI-generated content,” the professor said.

### **AI in school**

Minister of Digitalisation and Public Governance Karianne Tung believes it is important to strengthen the population's digital skills. Tung said she is following closely Sweden and Denmark's introduction of AI as a separate subject in higher secondary education.

“We think that youths have a lot of digital competence, but I am actually not so sure. Yes, they are good at clicking on screens, but how much do they really understand about programming and content, for instance? Understanding the technology and not least the connection between tech and society is incredibly important,” Tung said.

Petter Bae Brandtzæg thinks it might be wise to introduce a separate subject in schools covering artificial intelligence and media literacy.

“We do not gain these important skills by using ChatGPT on an iPad. I do not think children and youths should be using this type of technology before they are media literate enough,” said Bae Brandtzæg.



## EU directive gives Nordic platform workers new hope

The EU platform work directive is in place at last. It should help platform workers in the Nordic EU countries who work for companies like Foodora and Wolt to secure decent working conditions. In Norway, this was solved at the start of this year through a change to the working environment act.

NEWS

25.03.2024

TEXT: LINE SCHEISTRØEN, PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

After months of quarrelling, the EU countries agreed on the platform work directive this month. The original proposal was put forward in 2021.

The EU platform work directive is intended to regulate the working conditions for people who work for digital platforms like Foodora, Wolt and Uber. An estimated 28 million Europeans work on digital platforms today. The EU Commission says this number will rise to 43 million workers by the end of this year.

The directive's central point is to make a clearer distinction between who are employees and who are self-employed. It

will be up to each individual EU country to establish some of their own criteria, however. But if the platforms control factors like salaries and working hours, the workers should be considered to be employees, according to the new directive.

People who work for digital platforms will now be granted regular employee rights like holiday pay, pensions and sick pay.

The platform directive has faced strong resistance from large international companies. There has also been disagreement internally in the EU.

### What will the companies do?

Stine Rasmussen from Denmark's Aalborg University has been following the platform work directive debate with interest.

She and her Nordic research colleagues have previously seen the consequences of the platform economy in Nordic labour markets.

“Much of the debate in Denmark has centred on whether platform workers are employees or self-employed. Several platform companies, for instance in cleaning and food delivery, have been criticised by trade unions in particular for refusing to take on employers' responsibilities – because they see those working for or via the platforms as being independent.”

Rasmussen expects working conditions for platform workers will improve when agreement is reached on the Danish criteria.

She thinks it will be interesting to see the platform companies' reaction to the directive.

“The platform companies that operate in Denmark are facing big challenges to their concepts because it will be harder for them to build a business model around employees rather than self-employed workers,” she says.



*Foodora cyclist protesting in Oslo in the autumn of 2019. Their demands for a collective agreement were upheld.*

### Algorithm control

It will also no longer be possible to use algorithms in the apps to for instance sack someone who is working for a platform.

“This is a good thing because we know from ongoing Danish and Norwegian research that working environments can be negatively affected when work is run by algorithms, such as experiencing stress and working under high time pressure,” says Rasmussen.

She is not sure, however, whether it is enough to highlight the use of algorithms.

“Certain platform companies have a fairly complex use of algorithms. So despite more openness, it is hard to see exactly what the algorithm does or what happens with the platform workers' working conditions when the companies make changes to the algorithms,” says Rasmussen.

### New rules in place in Norway

It is unlikely that the platform work directive will have a major impact on platform workers in Norway.

This is because a new rule was introduced this year, stipulating that permanent employment should be assumed unless the client makes it overwhelmingly likely that there is a contractual relationship.

It is now the employer's responsibility to prove that a platform worker is a contractor and not an employee.

Norway's United Federation of Trade Unions, Fellesforbundet, is happy with the changes to the working environment act, says Fredrik Winger-Solvang from the Oslo Transport Workers' Union, section 4 in Fellesforbundet.

“We have already decided how this will work in Norway, so that is what we relate to,” he says.

### Experiences from “The Pink Strike”

In 2019, Foodora cyclists went on strike for better pay and working conditions. It became known as “The Pink Strike” due to the workers' pink outfits. The result was a collective agreement with Fellesforbundet's section 4, the Oslo Transport Workers' Union.

Winger-Solvang says that the union has had positive experiences with Foodora as a counterpart. Foodora is a member of Virke, The Federation of Norwegian Enterprise.

“They have taken their employer's responsibility seriously,” he says.

### A new campaign

Fellesforbundet is currently campaigning against Wolt in an attempt to organise their drivers. The Oslo Transport Worker's Union hopes to recruit enough members to eventually be able to demand a collective agreement with Wolt as well.

Anastasios Mertzanis, a Wolt driver in Trondheim, said this to the Nidaros newspaper:

“We work like slaves. We have no contract and no rights. Wolt can change the agreement whenever they please. If a customer makes a complaint about a delivery, Wolt can completely or partially withdraw the driver's payment.”

Fredrik Winger-Solvang participated in the event in Oslo. Events were also held in Trondheim and Bergen. He believes the Wolt drivers will be considered to be employees after the changes to the working environment act, and must therefore be hired.





## 500 years of Nordic history

What could you do on Nordic Day on 23 March to feel a bit Nordic? One thing is to go and see the big exhibition Nordic Life at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm. Svenska Dagbladet calls it “perfect”.

### NEWS

19.03.2024

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: HENDRIK ZEITLER/NORDISKA MUSEET

It has been five years in the planning and aims to give an un-interrupted narrative about life in Sweden and the Nordic region over 500 years. The exhibition features 4,000 objects, pictures and archive material presented across 27 rooms at the top of the museum.

It sounds overwhelming but the rooms are like large artworks themselves, a firework of colours and shapes where the content in the showcases spills over into the room outside. And there are plenty of opportunities to interact with the content.



*Exciting spaces have been created, where the design of the surroundings is an integral part of the experience.*

There were a few technical faults in the first week after the opening – like when we tried to write something witty with a digital quill on a digital sheet of paper in the room illustrating the emergence of freedom of the press.

“That doesn’t work right now I’m afraid,” says a friendly woman who turns out to be one of the exhibit producers, Ylva Lewenhaupt.

We take the opportunity to do a quick interview with her instead, about the ideas behind the exhibition, which has been divided into four seasons. At the start, there is snow along the walls and glass crystals sparkle in the ceiling before things turn warmer and greener.

“It is always a challenge to take such a big sweep across such a long time period. You have to figure out what to do in order to tie the story together. Our designers were very visually innovative. We wanted to bring in the seasons into the exhibition, because they are very important to how we live our lives in the Nordic region. They colour our lives in so many ways. The climate and nature give the exhibition a framework that leads us forwards,” says Ylva Lewenhaupt.



*Ylva Lewenhaupt with Matti Shevchenko Sandin and Hanna Leijon have been the exhibition's producers. Elna Nord has been project leader. Photo: Björn Lindahl.*

We have not been to the Nordic Museum since childhood when it was more fun to look for fossilised trilobites in the stone floor than to study exhibits in the sterile glass showcases. But a lot has happened in the world of museums since then.

“Things are very visual nowadays. We want to engage many senses, which is an overarching trend in the world of museums. People want to do stuff, see things, listen to things. What is less usual is that we have specially composed music for all of the rooms and seasons.

“One difference from previous exhibitions is that we have tried to focus on human destinies, featuring the individual people behind the objects,” says Ylva Lewenhaupt.

Screens are used to allow visitors to listen to people from that time period being described through objects and telling their stories – like Samuel Kiechel (1563 – 1619) who was the son of a wealthy merchant from Ulm. His 1586 travel diary from the Nordic region is one of the very few contemporary descriptions of Sweden and to a certain extent Denmark.

Kiechel was not particularly impressed with Stockholm. “I this really a capital city?,” he asked. But he was impressed by Sami craftsmanship and bought many leather shoes that really kept his feet warm.



*In the 1800s, café culture emerges and the bourgeoisie can afford to order portraits of themselves.*

150 years later, Catharina Forsberg (1736 – 1788) talks about being trained to be a midwife and how she was chosen partly because of her “narrow, long hands that could save lives”. But sometimes she was faced with the terrible choice of saving the life of the woman or the child.

The exhibition would be different if it had been staged in Norway, as all of the people who share their destinies do so in standard Swedish and not using dialects. That would never have happened in Norway, to be sure, where dialects are such a large part of people’s identities.

“The language and how accessible it should be is always a balancing act. We have no Norwegian or Danish representatives in our video stories. But we have one ethnic woman and three Sami people who speak their own languages and a Swedish dialect.”

He is Kristoffer Sjulsson (1828 – 1908) and we meet him as a young boy before he became a reindeer herder.

“Soon I will no longer sleep between the sheets of my warm bed,” he says while looking forward to following the reindeer herd, while also steeling himself for the experience.

What hit us the most is not the fact that the exhibition is so Nordic, but that the Sami element is highlighted to such a degree. Not only 500 years ago when only 1.5 million people

lived in the whole of Sweden/Finland but all through the history. There are Sami objects in nearly every showcase.

It is not by chance that the Nordic Life exhibition is held at the Nordic Museum. Few people have done more to promote the term “Nordic” than the museum’s founder Arthur Hazelius (1833 – 1901), who opened his first Scandinavian museum in 1873, exhibiting national costumes on life-size wax mannequins. Hazelius was also one of the first to gather objects and costumes not only from the upper classes but from common people too.

He also showed a special interest in the Sami population, and the Nordic Museum, which became the name for the collections in 1880, has the world’s largest collection of Sami objects.



*Many will recognise objects from the 1960s and 1970s, when the role of fathers started changing.*

“This is the Nordic Museum’s unique story, a story that no one else can tell. Nordic Life is based on the museum’s extensive collections, which have been built up over more than 150 years. Focusing on the history of Sweden, within an overall Nordic framework that includes our neighbouring countries, we portray life in the Nordic region based on real human stories and the lives of individuals,” says Sanne Houby-Nielsen, Director of the Nordic Museum, in a press release.

As we near the end of the exhibition and our own time, the number of objects falls. In the end, we arrive in a room containing a circle of what seems to be random things, but they all symbolise a life story, like a small plastic lion.

This has been chosen by Erick, born in 1990 to a reindeer herding family in Sápmi. He came out as gay as a teenager and moved to Stockholm. Here, he met his partner and they decided to adopt a little boy from South Africa – something that had just become possible for same-sex couples.



*A plastic lion bought for an adopted son from South Africa. Photo: Björn Lindahl.*

“I felt love for him right there in the children’s home. When I held him to my chest for the first time, I did not want to let go,” writes Erick.

This is an enormous leap from one of the first person to be presented in the exhibition – Lars Nilsson from Pite Lappmark. His grandchild fell into a well and he fetches a rope, prays to the gods and bangs his Sami drum to save the boy. For that, Lars Nilsson was sentenced to death for witchcraft and idolatry and burned at the stake in 1693.