

THE DRIVE TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY IN THE WORKFORCE

TPQ INTERVIEW WITH KARITA BEKKEMELLEM

By Nigar Göksel

In 2004, Norway introduced a 40 percent gender representation quota for the board members of state owned companies and privately owned public limited companies. In this interview with TPQ, the Minister who has led this initiative explains why this was necessary and articulates where the future lies for gender equality in the country.

“The silliest thing I hear is that we don't have enough qualified women. In Norway, there are a high number of women in paid work and Norwegian women are highly educated. The reason is not that we do not have enough qualified women – indeed we do – it is that women's competence is often ignored. We regard the legislation regarding women on companies' boards as an important step towards equality between the sexes, a more balanced distribution of power, and a fairer and wealthier society.”

Karita Bekkemellem*

* Karita Bekkemellem is the Minister of Children and Equality in Norway

TPQ Interview With Karita Bekkemellem

TPQ: Why in Norway was it a priority to foster increased participation of women in the labor force?

Bekkemellem: Norway has 4.5 million inhabitants. Approximately 80 percent of the women aged between 20 and 66 work (The EU average is about 55 percent), yet at the same time the average birth rate is 1.84 children per woman, which is one of the highest in Europe.

Europe faces the challenges of an increasing elderly population together with decreasing birth rates. In such a picture, it is important to make use of all the human resources in a country in order to maintain the welfare state and to keep the economy running. Europe needs to bring more women into the workforce and the economy, and we must encourage people to stay in the labor market for longer. More women than men choose higher education these days –in other words, women are the future entrepreneurs and innovators.

TPQ: Why have women been less employed in the private sector than men, what have the obstacles been over the years for women joining the labor force?

Bekkemellem: The share of employed women is lower than men in Norway, as it has been elsewhere in Europe for the last decades. The main reasons why women have a low degree of worklife participation has been related with the care for children and the family. Women still take the main responsibility for domestic issues.

But today, almost every family applies for kindergarten services or other daycare possibilities for their children.. Both men and women can then participate in the worklife. We have a challenge though, which is that the traditional choice of profession for women, part-time employment, does not favor women in the long run.

TPQ: Did measures such as fathers' right to parental leave, child-care provided by the state or by the companies and shared custody of children after a divorce help to resolve these obstacles? What more can be done?

Today one of five Norwegian men (18 percent) take more than minimum parental leave –which is six weeks for fathers. Parental leave is one year and can be shared between the parents. We hope parents will increasingly share this time equally and this will inspire men and women to share family tasks.

I think flexible work hours, more options for parental leave, a network of kindergartens and childcare centers, and national campaigns encouraging men to take more responsibility for caring tasks are the most central tools.

Allowing both men and women to have equal rights in boardrooms, in the leadership of corporations, and in all issues of society is the goal. Equal salaries for comparable professions will also help.

TPQ: What are the main reasons behind the low percentage of women in decision making positions? Without quotas and special designed initiatives, would it not have been possible to overcome this inequality?

Bekkemellem: Most men do not let go of their power easily. Men have chosen to support other men for a long time, and changing their attitude takes time also. With the help of new legislations and other means, the practice will change faster. We are in a hurry!

The acknowledgement of the need for more women in company boards is in general established, however, some companies would have preferred not to have the gender representation requirement implemented by law. Among the publicly owned companies, only a few are still in breach with the law. I have been in contact with the ministries responsible for the companies which still do not fulfil the requirements of the law, and have been promised that the boards of these companies will by the end of May be in accordance with the gender balance demand. The fact that publicly owned companies are able to achieve gender balance on their boards proves that this is possible, and should be an inspiration to the privately owned public limited companies.

TPQ: Did you face negative reactions when you implemented these regulations?

Bekkemellem: I still haven't heard any intelligent criticism of equal gender representation. Reaching a balanced participation is a question of democracy. We regard the legislation on women in boards as an important step towards equality between the sexes, a more balanced distribution of power, and a fairer and wealthier society. This legislation will secure women's influence in decision making processes that are critically important for our economy. To make use of all –not half– of the human resources our society possesses, this is the intelligent thing to do!

For several years, more women than men have finished higher education. Almost 65 percent of the students at universities are women. 50 percent of law school graduates are women, as are 40 percent of MBA graduates. Approximately 70 percent of the graduates from the veterinary college, the school of dental surgery and the psychology departments are also women. Almost 60 percent of Medical School graduates are women. Despite the fact that an increasing number of women have finished higher education, the number of women on company boards remain small. The reason is not that we do not have enough qualified women – indeed we do – it is that women's competence is ignored.

TPQ: Have women joining company boards had effects on the productivity of the businesses?

Bekkemellem: The last figures (2007) demonstrate that 40 percent of private companies fulfill their obligations by law concerning women on their boards. Within the next year (2008) all private companies must fulfill the requirement.

The quota legislation has been to force for only a few years, so it is early to make an answer for that question. The few studies we have had so far indicate that increased share of women in company boards have a small positive or (only one study) no effect on the companies "bottom lines" (surplus or deficits).

TPQ: What is your vision for the future?

Bekkemellem: My vision for the future is equal opportunities for women and men – for women to take part in public and private boards and councils equal to men and for men to take responsibility for the care of children and the family on equal basis.