



Wales Centre for Public Policy
Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

Gender Equality: Learning from Nordic Nations

Gender Equality Review Phase Two

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Summary

- This report summarises discussions from a gender equality knowledge exchange, facilitated by Wales Centre for Public Policy, between experts from Nordic nations, Welsh Government ministers and officials, and Chwarae Teg.
- Wales has world-leading legislation which provides a good basis for working towards gender equality.
- There is no ‘quick fix’ for gender equality, and nor is there a blueprint for success; it looks different in different nations, and is always a work-in-progress.
- An intersectional approach, taking into account how gender intersects with other important factors such as race and class, is vital to achieving gender equality. Nordic countries are trying to incorporate an intersectional perspective into existing approaches, Welsh Government has the opportunity to incorporate intersectionality into its efforts going forward.
- Gender mainstreaming is a key mechanism for achieving gender equality. It means taking gender into account during the development of all policies as well as designing specific policies to promote gender equality. Applying gender mainstreaming to new policies, rather than to existing policies, may be the most effective starting point for the Welsh Government.
- Culture change, establishing political ownership, gender impact assessments, and capacity building, are all necessary for successful gender mainstreaming.
- Setting clear goals with indicators, and measuring progress towards achieving them, is essential in making progress in gender equality. The Welsh Government might consider setting specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound goals for achieving gender equality.
- Gender budgeting activates gender mainstreaming, and means integrating a gender perspective in the budget process.
- Measuring progress also requires robust evidence, such as data broken down by gender, race and class. Analytical capacity to interpret this evidence is also needed.
- Achieving gender equality is not the responsibility of government alone – public services, voluntary organisations, community groups, businesses, the media, and society at large needs to be involved.
- The Welsh Government has already made significant progress in seeking to improve gender equality in Wales, and this ought to be celebrated.

Introduction

Ministers have asked the Wales Centre for Public Policy to conduct three pieces of work that provide independent evidence and expertise to inform the Gender Equality Review (GER), commissioned by the then First Minister in 2018:

- An international review of gender equality policies and practices;
- An expert workshop to explore what Wales can learn about gender equality policies and practice from Nordic countries; and
- An evidence review of effective approaches to gender budgeting.

We published our [international review of gender equality policies and practices](#) in 2018 (Parken, 2018). This identified Nordic countries as leading the way in implementing policies intended to promote gender equality. In light of this, ministers asked the Centre to facilitate an event that would enable Welsh Government officials to discuss these approaches with leading academic experts and senior policy makers from Nordic countries.

The resulting ‘Nordic Exchange’ took place on 21 February 2019 and consisted of a roundtable event with the Deputy Minister Jane Hutt AM, senior Welsh Government officials, experts from Iceland, Sweden, Denmark and Finland, and colleagues from Chwarae Teg and the Centre. A list of participants is given in Annex 1.

The design of the event and the selection of the experts was informed by a review of the academic and policy literature and in-depth discussions with a wide range of experts. These highlighted four key topics that were particularly relevant to the GER in Wales and enabled us to identify a combination of experts who between them could address these key topics and offer detailed knowledge of policies across a range of countries.

The four areas that we identified and structured the discussion around were:

1. What is meant by gender equality and what progress have Nordic countries made towards achieving it?
2. What gender mainstreaming policies and practices have Nordic countries adopted?
3. How have Nordic countries implemented gender budgeting and which approaches have worked best?
4. How have Nordic countries measured progress in achieving gender equality?

We commissioned experts to prepare short briefings on these that were circulated in advance of the event (published online) and we invited short opening statements on each topic before opening each session up for broader discussion. To help situate these

discussions in the Welsh context, we invited two opening contributions, from the Deputy Minister, who opened the event with an overview of the progress made in promoting gender equality in Wales and the remaining challenges that she is keen to address, and from the Chief Executive of Chwarae Teg, who gave participants an overview of the GER and Chwarae Teg's work on gender equality.

This report provides a summary of the learning that was shared at the event. In order to facilitate open and frank discussion of what has and has not worked, the workshop was conducted under the 'Chatham House Rule' whereby contributions are recorded on a non-attributable basis, and this report follows that convention.

What is gender equality and how do Nordic countries approach it?

Gender equality has been defined by the Welsh GER Advisory Group as a state in which:

‘regardless of sex, gender identity or gender expression people enjoy the same social, economic, and political rights, resources, opportunities and protections’ (Chwarae Teg, 2019).

The Advisory Group argues that to achieve this we:

‘must seek to address the imbalances in power and resources that gendered systems create, which prevent equality of outcomes ... on an intersectional basis[,] recognising that gender is always intersected by all the other dimensions of inequality’. (Ibid.)

Each of the nations represented at our roundtable had taken different approaches to defining and achieving gender equality. Given this, and the issues raised in the short pre-event briefings and opening statements, the discussion revolved around four broad themes related to gender equality in Nordic nations: legislation; gender equality as a work-in-progress; transference to other contexts; and intersectionality.

Legislation matters

Experts from Nordic countries reported that in their experience robust legislation is needed to underpin attempts to achieve greater gender equality which might otherwise be downgraded by a change in government. They suggested that the legislation Wales already has provides a good basis for this. The Government of Wales Act 2006 (s77), the Wales Specific Equality Duties, the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015, and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 are regarded as world-leading legislation. The challenge is to secure effective implementation of the intent signalled by these Acts.

Efforts to achieve gender equality are always a work in progress

Whilst Nordic countries are widely seen as having made most progress towards achieving gender equality (EIGE, 2017, World Economic Forum, 2018), experts cautioned that it is still

a 'work in progress' and there is no 'quick fix'. Sweden, for example, has been working on gender equality for the past 40 years, but there are still gender inequalities in several areas, particularly in the workplace and in the unequal distribution of care work.

Experts also warned that support for gender equality in governments and wider society can never be taken for granted. Despite Sweden's long history of pursuing gender equality, and broad-based support for this, the rise of right-wing populist parties in the 2018 general election, coupled with a trend towards more conservative values in wider political discourse and among the Swedish population, meant that a new Gender Equality Agency was threatened with closure.

Policies and practices from Nordic countries may not be replicable in other contexts

Nordic countries have different welfare systems and labour markets to the UK, and their governments have powers which facilitate gender equality. Many of these powers are not available to the Welsh Government, including some tax raising powers.

For example, Sweden's individual gender regime model, which provides welfare payments on an individual level, encouraging men and women to share childcare duties and therefore providing women with greater opportunity for paid employment, is considered a key ingredient in Sweden's successful progress towards gender equality. This contrasts with the family breadwinner regime model, which is based on traditional divisions of labour between men and women and unequal access to benefits, and which has historically been the approach taken in the UK (Lewis, 1992).

As such, there is no 'gender equality blueprint' which can be easily mapped on to other countries, with each country taking into account what was possible and considered most effective for them. Gender mainstreaming, for example (discussed further below), is the main strategy for achieving equality policy targets in Sweden, but while it has been formally adopted in Iceland, it has not yet been fully implemented there. Gender equality is therefore 'an "open" political concept that "travels" between different policy areas, organisations, and even countries' (Callerstig, 2014).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is defined by the GER Advisory Group as:

‘the way in which power structures based on factors such as gender, race, sexuality, disability, class, age and faith interact with each other and create inequalities, discrimination and oppression ... One single form of discrimination cannot and should not be understood in isolation from another. A truly intersectional approach ensures that this does not happen’. (Chwarae Teg, 2019)

Experts reported that despite consistently scoring well in measures of gender equality, Nordic countries need to pay more attention to intersectionality.

Engaging citizens and civil society in gender equality work is vital in making progress in addressing intersectionality, especially with groups for whom gender equality may not seem relevant. One expert gave the example of a local authority that wanted to understand why official statistics showed that boys were less likely than girls to visit the dentist. Through more fine-grain analysis, it found that it was boys from ethnic minority backgrounds living in deprived areas that were least likely to visit the dentist, and in response it targeted efforts to increase those boys’ visits.

What gender mainstreaming policies and practices have Nordic countries adopted?

Gender mainstreaming is defined as:

‘the mechanism by which, by taking gender into account at the formulation of policy and through each stage of the policy process, policy is made to promote equality’ (Parken, 2018).

Nordic nations have generally implemented, or attempted to implement¹, gender mainstreaming as a way of working towards gender equality. They tend to adopt a dual-strategy to gender mainstreaming which involves taking gender equality into account during the development of all policies as well as designing specific policies to promote gender equality.

¹ For example, Iceland has adopted gender mainstreaming as an official strategy, but there is a lack of evidence to suggest that it is being actively implemented – that is, while gender is taken into account during the development of some policies, this is not the case for all policies. Iceland has, however, designed a number of specific policies to promote gender equality.

Gender mainstreaming has been applied at multiple levels including:

- the political level – for example, as the official strategy of the Swedish Government since 1993;
- the local level – in Sweden, regions and municipalities have adopted the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life (Council of European Municipalities and Regions, 2006); and
- the organisational level – as demonstrated by the Nordic Council of Ministers' Gender Effect at Work initiative (Norden, 2019) and in higher education by the guidance from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2019a).

The workshop discussion focused particularly on gender mainstreaming at a political level, though many of the same principles are applicable to employers, including the Welsh Government.

Experts identified five key factors necessary for successful gender mainstreaming:

- Culture change;
- Establishing political ownership of gender mainstreaming;
- The use of gender impact assessments;
- Investing in effective capacity building and training for politicians and officials; and
- Effective goal setting, measurement of progress and political commitment.

Culture change

Many Nordic governments face a gap between policy and implementation in gender mainstreaming, which Alfama (2015) attributes to actors' agency. Behaviour change approaches can help to address this and drive broader institutional change.

Situating gender equality within the language of fairness and human rights can help to make gender equality seem more relevant and accessible. Specific language which identifies exactly at whom a policy is targeted – i.e. not simply 'students' or 'retired people' – is also important, as is shifting the default language around gender. In Sweden the government deliberately refers to 'women and men' as opposed to 'men and women' to help shift thinking away from patriarchal norms.

Nordic countries consider gender equality to be about more than women's issues, with all experts agreeing that gender equality will not be achieved without involving both women and men. This also means challenging unhealthy norms of masculinity which benefit neither men nor women.

People respond more positively to constructive dialogue which highlights successes rather than criticisms and challenges. Although it is important to identify where progress can be made, experts suggested that the Welsh Government should be applauded for, and celebrate, its commitment to working towards gender equality and the robust legislation that it has in place to foster gender equality.

Evidence also shows that gender equality is often under-resourced and relies on enthusiasts with limited scope to influence senior management (Callerstig, 2014). A lack of women in senior leadership positions – in government and in business – makes it less likely that gender equality will be seen as a priority. And it is important that politicians create an environment in which officials are not afraid to identify where a policy could have negative implications for gender equality.

Media support for gender equality is helpful in Nordic nations for raising awareness of gender equality among the public. Discussants raised the lack of media focus on gender equality in Wales. One expert gave an example of how framing can help make gender equality messages more appealing to the media. They explained how a report on the positive impact women's employment makes on GDP was picked up by the media because the report's messaging focused on how individuals would have had less money in their pockets had women's employment not increased.

Establishing ownership

Ownership of gender mainstreaming needs to be shared across all levels of government. Most Nordic countries have dedicated gender equality officers and some have appointed a Minister for Gender Equality. But it is important that this does not mean that other politicians and officials see gender equality as being 'someone else's job'. Everyone in government, at a national and local level, has some responsibility for gender equality, since it affects almost all policy areas and is in keeping with a gender mainstreaming strategy.

In Sweden and Iceland, gender equality officials at a national (and at a regional level in Sweden) tend to combine the role with other jobs, rather than only being focused on gender equality. They receive gender equality training, but are not necessarily 'gender equality experts', and are not required to shoulder the responsibility for gender equality alone. Instead, all Swedish officials are given a responsibility to safeguard gender equality issues, though at a local government level this is dependent on whether regions and municipalities have chosen to promote gender equality, such as by signing up to the Charter (Council of European Municipalities and Regions, 2006).

Gender Impact Assessments

The European Commission defines Gender Impact Assessments (GIAs) as:

‘the process of comparing and assessing, according to gender relevant criteria, the current situation and trend with the expected development resulting from the introduction of the proposed policy’ (EIGE, 2019b).

Our experts said that improving GIAs can require significant time and capacity and acknowledged that there was a lot of room for improvement of GIAs in Nordic countries. However, they are an important tool for gender mainstreaming.

In Finland, officials are expected to take a simple approach, spending a few minutes at the start of designing a new policy to answer the following questions:

- Does this policy relate to people’s lives?
- Will this policy have a different impact on women compared to men?

If the answer to either of these questions is yes, officials must then consider the potential implications for gender equality, and write a short memo about what is already known about the relation between that policy area and gender equality, including points which may seem obvious. This gender perspective memo should be brief and easy to understand to enable decision-makers to be aware of the potential implications of the policy.

Since the first feminist Swedish government in 2014, each new policy proposal has been required to have a GIA attached before it is submitted to the Ministry of Finance to request funding. As the GIAs require knowledge of gender equality, officials from the Division for Gender Equality conduct workshops on GIAs and act as internal consultants to provide advice and support.

Importantly, in order for GIAs to have a positive effect on gender equality, actions must be taken first to acknowledge and then ideally to address (and correct) any negative impacts identified. The experts emphasised that this means integrating the gender perspective into policy making early on in the process. GIAs developed at a late stage can become a tick-box exercise and contribute to a compliance mentality.

Capacity building and training

Ownership is also about ensuring that officials and politicians understand gender equality and its importance. With gender equality being everyone’s responsibility comes a hidden assumption that everyone has the requisite knowledge. A lack of gender equality knowledge can severely impede gender mainstreaming efforts. As such, Nordic nations have different models for training civil servants and Ministers and use a range of online e-learning modules and face-to-face training.

Other approaches from across the Nordic nations include:

- Gender equality ‘personal trainers’;
- Gender equality sessions in the induction programme for new civil servants;
- A half-day gender equality seminar for new Ministers;
- Bilateral 30-minute meetings between gender equality officials and Ministers; and
- Tailored workshops for key stakeholders.

At bilateral meetings gender equality officials provide a minister with an overview of gender equality, the relevance of their portfolio to gender equality, and advice on how to ask their officials to provide a gender perspective on their work. Gender equality officials therefore need knowledge both of gender equality and of the specific policy area in question. These individual meetings with Ministers allow for an honest discussion and the opportunity to ask the ‘obvious’ questions, which they may not feel comfortable doing in front of others.

It is important not to make assumptions about levels of existing knowledge. One expert gave the example of an explicitly feminist Minister who was especially pro-gender mainstreaming, but even she had not realised that she ought to be asking officials to provide a gender equality perspective.

In addition, keeping training simple is key. Gender theory is complex and can be difficult to communicate. So, effective training programmes focus on the simple, easy-to-grasp basics. Measures which enable everyone to ask the ‘obvious’ questions, boost confidence in knowledge of gender equality, and mitigate a fear of getting things wrong, can help create a supportive environment for gender mainstreaming. In addition, it is not sufficient simply to provide information on gender equality; this must be coupled with behaviour change approaches which move people away from doing things ‘as they always have’.

Goal setting

Experts reported that identifying a set of clearly-defined goals early on is crucial to making progress on gender equality. Goals need to be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound.

Sweden has an overarching policy goal for gender equality – women and men shall have the same power to shape society and their own lives – with six sub-goals sitting beneath this:

1. Gender equal division of power and influence;
2. Economic gender equality;

3. Gender equal education;
4. Gender equal distribution of unpaid housework and provision of care;
5. Gender equal health; and
6. Men's violence against women must stop.

The priority attached to these goals was raised by the 2014-2018 government's commitment to being a feminist government.

Importantly, goals must be accompanied by indicators (discussed later in relation to measuring progress) and also by step-by-step instructions for civil servants and politicians on how they can be achieved, coupled with internal dedicated support. For example, the Swedish government employs Gender Mainstreaming Coordinators in each Ministry, who act as internal 'gender equality consultants' to offer advice and support on gender mainstreaming.

How have Nordic countries implemented gender budgeting and which approaches have worked best?

The OECD defines gender budgeting as:

'integrating a clear gender perspective within the overall context of the budget process, through the use of special process and analytical tools, with a view to promoting gender responsive policies' (Downes et al., 2016).

There is a recognition that conventional budgetary processes are considered gender-neutral but in fact lead to decisions that unwittingly disadvantage women and girls. Conversely gender budgeting can be used to make alternative resource allocation decisions that promote gender equality (Sharp and Van Dev, 2004). It is, therefore, a means of activating gender mainstreaming.

Each Nordic country has, to some extent, implemented tools of gender budgeting to work towards gender equality. However, as each country has taken a different approach, the discussion developed around the general principles of gender budgeting, including what gender budgeting is, the governance of gender budgeting, and the role of civil society. A more detailed explanation of Nordic countries' and other approaches to gender budgeting can be found in the Wales Centre for Public Policy evidence review on gender budgeting (O'Hagan, forthcoming 2019).

Beyond 'pink and blue budgets'

Gender budgeting is not about 'pink and blue budgets', or about achieving a 50:50 split in funding for men and women. Rather, gender budgeting should focus on the outcomes of a funding decision. One expert gave an example of how local government had spent more on summer activities for boys than for girls. Perhaps more boys than girls wanted to participate in summer activities; perhaps girls were not aware of the activities on offer; perhaps boys engaged in costlier activities. There may have been legitimate reasons for an unequal resource distribution, but it could also have promoted inequality. Hence, simply aiming for a 50:50 split in funding may not necessarily have been the best course of action; an analysis of gender needs, relationships and norms must accompany decisions on resource distributions.

Governance

Experts recommended that responsibility for gender budgeting should sit within the Ministry of Finance and that dedicated officials trained in gender budgeting need to be integrated into the Ministry. In countries where there is a Minister for Gender Equality, they work closely with the Minister of Finance.

Some countries have introduced incentives and/or sanctions to encourage gender budgeting. For example, one expert described how in their country budgets are only allocated to policy areas which have completed a gender impact assessment. In one municipality, 5% of allocated resources are deducted from departments which do not complete a gender impact assessment.

Civil Society

Whilst government has a fundamental responsibility to ensure it allocates resources in a way that promotes gender equality, external scrutiny is important to the effective introduction and implementation of gender budgeting. This can come from committees, provided they have been trained to scrutinise budgets from a gender perspective, but experts also noted the important role played by civil society. Gender budgeting is most effective when external pressure is placed on the government and must therefore involve civil society, which can act

as a critical friend. In Iceland, for example, the activist group Femínsk Fjármál is credited with holding the Government to account on its gender budgeting efforts.

This external scrutiny requires a willingness from governments to be transparent about budget making decisions. In the UK, the Women's Budget Group provides budget analysis from a gender perspective, but receives no government support for this work and is no longer active in Wales.

How have Nordic countries measured progress in achieving gender equality?

In addition to goal setting (discussed above), participants at the roundtable acknowledged that measuring progress through effective gathering of evidence, and analytical capacity to interpret that evidence, is vital in working towards gender equality.

Evidence

Using evidence to monitor and evaluate gender equality is essential but challenging. Global (World Economic Forum, 2018) and European (EIGE, 2017) rankings can provide useful benchmarks, but robust and gender-disaggregated data and qualitative evidence on country, regional, and local levels are necessary to identify progress on a granular level towards a government's stated gender equality goals and service improvement.

In addition, intersectional approaches require data which are broken down not only by gender, but also by other categories such as class and race. The challenge for a country of Wales' size means is that it may not be possible to draw statistical significance from small samples. Averages can also obscure inequalities. In addition, Wales, unlike some of the Nordic nations, does not use single personal identifiers (a number assigned at birth), making it difficult to connect data across services. Furthermore, there can be sensitivity about and resistance to releasing data from those who collect it, especially if it highlights inequalities.

In Sweden, the independent² statistical agency (Statistics Sweden) has a mandate to monitor and publish progress on the 170 indicators across the six sub-goals of gender equality.

² This is a government agency, but is independent insofar as all government agencies in Sweden are protected by the constitutional ban on ministerial rule.

These indicators are set by the agency, not by government, and government is not able to interfere with what those indicators are. The reports are updated twice a year. Progress based on selected core indicators are also reported by government each year to parliament in the budget bill. In addition, the agency regularly publishes data on gender equality at a national and local level, in visually appealing booklets that get wide media coverage (Statistics Sweden, 2018). The new Gender Equality Agency in Sweden is intended to coordinate and follow up on gender equality policies, and to provide various forms of support on achieving gender equality. Much of this work is based on data provided by Statistics Sweden.

Analytical capacity

It is important to have the capacity to analyse evidence and make sense of what the data mean for public policy. One expert gave the example of the need to be able to accurately interpret statistics on violence against women. An increase in reported incidents might at first sight be interpreted as an indication that policies to reduce violence are failing. But further analysis might show that women are becoming more willing to report incidents and are increasingly confident in the system's ability to tackle the problem when they do so.

What can Wales learn from the Nordic countries?

As noted above, it would be a mistake to assume that what has worked in the Nordic countries can be successfully transplanted to Wales. Each Nordic country has developed its own bespoke approach, tailored to its policy ambitions and what is feasible politically and culturally, and Wales will need to do the same. However, the discussion did provide some valuable lessons for the Welsh Government to consider.

- **Be practical and set realistic goals** – Wales has in place legislation to promote gender equality. The challenge now is to ensure that the legislative framework is driving change in the way it was intended. The experience of Nordic countries suggests that gender mainstreaming is always a work-in-progress but that setting, working towards, and measuring progress against achievable goals can create momentum and confidence that change is possible.
- **Build gender equality in at the start of the policy process** – It is easier to introduce a gender perspective at the outset of the policy process, building upon knowledge already learnt. This will require training for officials. The Welsh

Government might make most progress by incorporating gender mainstreaming into new decisions rather than trying to apply post hoc to existing policies.

- **Take an intersectional approach to gender equality** – Nordic countries have been slow to adopt an intersectional approach to gender equality, which can be harder to do once gender equality strategies are already in progress. The Welsh Government has the opportunity to incorporate an intersectional approach in to its efforts going forward.
- **Celebrate success** – Experts from the Nordic countries were impressed by the political commitment in Wales to gender equality and by the willingness to seek to learn from elsewhere. They emphasised that this intent, as well as the progress that has already been made, is laudable and worth celebrating.
- **Incentivise the right behaviours** – It is important to win hearts and minds by persuading politicians and officials of the benefits of gender equality, showing them how it can help to achieve goals in other areas (such as wellbeing, education, or social care), and giving them confidence that it is possible to take positive steps towards achieving it. This is a much more effective change strategy than focusing on the deficits and punishing people for failing to act.
- **Adopt gender mainstreaming at all levels of government** – It is important to persuade local authorities and other public bodies of the merits of gender equality rather than simply imposing new duties on them. This has been successful in Sweden, where local authorities are invited rather than obligated to promote gender equality by signing up to the Charter (Council of European Municipalities and Regions, 2006).
- **Invest in capacity building for politicians and officials** – The experience of Nordic countries shows the importance of awareness raising and training in order to equip policy makers – nationally and locally – to develop and implement policies that promote gender equality.
- **Engage beyond government** – Progress towards achieving gender equality requires fundamental changes in society, and there is a limit to what governments can achieve working on their own. So, it is important for the Welsh Government to work with public services, voluntary organisations, community groups, businesses, the media and others in order to make progress in achieving gender equality in Wales. Policy makers need to consider how they can use their formal powers and resources and their ‘soft power’ and informal influence to mobilise support for action to promote greater equality.

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Annex 1: Participants

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