

From a Small to a Large Minority: Women in Scandinavian Politics

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Does the Size of the Minority Count?

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take-off into a new situation or process (Rendel 1987). By analogy, it is said that a qualitative shift will take place when women exceed a proportion of about 30 percent in an organization. A large minority can make a difference, even if still a minority.

In physics, the concept of a critical mass is applied to a process that takes place in isolated entities or rooms. In social sciences, however, every entity we look at is normally characterized by some degree of interaction with its surroundings. Therefore the analogy has its limitations. Yet, this article makes the point that we should not neglect that politics is also a workplace, an organization with its own rules, norms and culture.

The idea of a critical mass is most often applied to situations when women constitute *less* than 30 percent, in this way explaining why the entrance of women into politics has not made more difference – yet!

In this article, however, I discuss the relevance of the concept, based on the experiences of women in Scandinavian politics. Although politics in Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark is still dominated by men, a very impressive increase in women's political representation has taken place during the last 10–15 years. Today, women constitute one quarter to one third of the representatives in the Nordic parliaments, regional and local councils.

The question is this: What is supposed to change when moving from a small to a large minority? Is it possible to identify a self-increasing process, which will start when the minority reaches a certain size? Are we in Scandinavia witnessing a critical mass at work?

To clarify the discussion of the importance of the size of the minority, this article selects six aspects of women's position for further investigation.

Some Methodological Remarks

Comparing women's position in politics today with earlier historical periods with lower representation might seem a sensible approach to studying what happens when women moved from being a small to a large minority. It is, however, impossible to isolate the effect of the relative number of women in the political institutions from the effect of all the other changes that took place during the same period. The same problem of isolating the factors arises when trying to compare the Nordic countries to the situation for women politicians in for instance the United Kingdom with its only 6 percent women in the House of Commons.

A third approach could be to compare politics in different local councils in one country. Several studies, using multivariate correlations analysis, have with different results tried – among many other variables – to measure the effect of the relative number of women in various local councils on the expenditures on for instance day care and care for the elderly. For the

discussion of what will change when the minority grows, however, more qualitative approaches are needed.

The focus of this article is a theoretical discussion of the relevance of the concept of critical mass. The empirical data used in this article on women in politics in the five Nordic countries comes from several sources: Lengthy interviews with 28 Nordic women politicians at the national and local level in a structured, non-representative sample (Dahlerup 1985); results from a questionnaire sent to all national political parties in the five Nordic countries (Dahlerup: The POP Survey 1984) and results from a questionnaire sent to all women's organizations and equality committees within the same political parties at national level, provided such organizations existed in the party (Dahlerup: The WOC Survey 1984); information about what strategies women in the five countries have used to improve women's political representation (Dahlerup 1988); data on women's political representation in Haavio-Mannila et al. (1985). The surveys of local councillors made by Hellevik & Skard (1985) and Wallin et al. (1981) have provided useful information.

The quotations in the text are not supposed to be representative of the attitudes of women politicians. Many more studies are needed to cover the attitudes of women politicians in all the Nordic countries. The quotations are here as illustrations of attitudes that can be found among women politicians today.

Women as a 'Minority Group'

Back in 1951, Helen Mayer Hacker wrote her famous article on 'Women as a Minority Group' (Hacker 1951). In this article, Hacker parallels women's position with that of minority groups, like black Americans, at that time a new and challenging comparison (see also Myrdal 1944).

Helen Hacker's basic idea is that although they constitute 50 percent or more of the population, women – like minority groups – suffer from discrimination and unequal treatment. Women also display many of the psychological characteristics ascribed to minorities, such as self-hatred, feelings of inferiority, denying a feeling of group identification and yet developing a separate subculture within the dominant culture. Subjectively denying that they belong to the group 'women', many women perceive the discrimination they meet as just the consequence of individual shortcomings. Women who make it in the male world, on the other hand, will try to dissociate themselves from other women. This is a theory of women's 'minority status' in society in general.

When Women are Actually in the Minority

Although interlinked, the theory of women as a minority group should not be confused with theories of the problems women encounter when

numerically in the minority, e.g. as politicians, engineers, mechanics, executives or journalists.

The theory about women in actual minority positions looks at women *within* an organization. This is also the focus of the present article.

The connection between the minority group status of women and women in actual minority positions derives from the fact that many of the problems women experience as minorities within organizations are related to the 'minority' status of women in society at large.

In her important argument, that the relative numbers of women are crucial to their performance and efficiency in the corporations, Rosabeth Moss Kanter concludes that the problems of these women derive from women's minority position in the organization, not from the fact that they are women. Other minorities, such as blacks, will encounter the same problems (Kanter 1977).

My counterargument will be that the 'minority' status of women or blacks outside the organizations interacts with their status inside the organization, thus creating greater problems than white males encounter when in a minority position.

Some minorities do fine inside an organization if they, directly or indirectly, get support and resources from outside. The successful careers of male nurses illustrate that 'majority group status' in society at large might balance or even counterbalance an actual minority position inside the organization.

Needless to say, women do not get power just because they are in the majority. Lots of women work in factories or offices with a female majority. That does not enable them to better their lower pay or monotonous work conditions. They are paid less because they work in fields dominated by women, and they are placed there because they are women. But maybe their 'female culture' in spite of their powerlessness does influence the climate and social conventions at the workplace? My argument is that in this discussion we must distinguish between many different aspects of the position of women.

Problems Women Encounter as a Minority in Male Dominated Organizations

The following problems are compiled from the literature on women entering male dominated professions and workplaces. Not all women in a minority position in male dominated organizations encounter all of these problems. Some say that they have no problems at all. The following however, lists problems that many women meet, often without being able to conceptualize the problem. The question here is whether women in politics meet the same problems, and maybe only when in a small minority?

Consequence of women being in the minority in an organization (most of them shared with others in a minority position)

- high visibility
- become token, e.g. symbols of the entire sex (group), symbols of what women can do, stand-ins for all women
- role conflicts, e.g. too feminine or too masculine
- lack of allies in the organization
- exclusion from informal network
- lack of knowledge of the informal power structure and the recruitment process, lack of personal power
- higher dropout rate
- lower rate of promotion
- lower efficiency
- feel uncomfortable in the dominant culture of the organization
- over-accommodation ×
- sexual harassment ×
- lack of legitimate authority ×
- stereotyping ×
- no considerations for family obligations by the organization ×
- exposed to double standard ×

Problems marked with an × are considered *combined* consequences of the minority position and women's status in a patriarchal society in general. Problems such as lower pay seem to derive solely from women's position in general, not from their being in the minority.

The discussion of women in politics must take the special feature of the political system into consideration. There are parallels between women in politics and women in the corporations, but also marked differences. Women politicians seem to be caught between two conflicting expectations:

- (1) Women politicians must prove that they are just like (just as able as) male politicians, who in general have longer seniority and whose gender occupied the political arena long before women were allowed to participate.
- (2) Women politicians must prove that it makes a difference when more women are elected. This second demand comes from the women's organizations and the feminist movement, who critically ask why it does not make more difference that there are now more women in politics?

In the democratic system of one man or woman one vote in the assemblies, and of rule by the majority, each member has a certain value, even the backbenchers. In such a system the question of the relative number of women takes on a specific importance.

The Relative Numbers Count

In her study of women in a big American corporation, Rosabeth Moss Kanter makes the point that the size of the minority is significant. It is the proportion of social categories, here women and men, that makes an important difference. Moss Kanter identifies four types of group on the basis of different proportional representation of socially different people, be it women/men or blacks/whites.

The *uniform group or organization* has only one significant social group and its culture dominates the organizations.

The *skewed group* (the minority being no more than max. 15 percent) is controlled by the numerically dominant group and its culture. The minority become tokens, that is, they are considered symbols of their entire group, especially if they fumble. 'They are made aware of their differences from the numerical dominants, but then must often pretend that the differences do not exist, or have no implications', Moss Kanter writes (p. 239). Tokens are alone, yet the dynamics of interaction around them 'create a pressure for them to seek advantage by dissociating themselves from other of their category and hence, to remain alone' (p. 239). This implies that tokens are unable to form alliances with each other.

Relaxing situations, e.g. after-work drinks and sports events, are often most stressful for tokens, who then lack the protection of defined positions and structured interaction. In short, according to Moss Kanter, organizational, social, and personal ambivalence surrounds people in token situations.

In the *tilted group* ('with ratios of perhaps 65:35', Kanter writes, from her figure, however, from 15 to about 40), the minority is becoming strong enough to begin to influence the culture of the group, and alliances between minority group members become a possibility. The 'tokens' have changed into a 'minority'.

In the *balanced group* (about 60:40 and down to 50:50), culture and interaction reflect this balance, Kanter argues. And for the individuals in such a balanced group the outcome will depend more on other structural and personal factors than their type (gender, race).

The basis of this reasoning is, of course, that there is a difference in culture and behaviour between the minority and the majority group. The argument here is that alongside the similarities between women and men, also marked differences exist – not necessarily from birth, but from their different social positions and their different social experiences.

Moss Kanter does not talk about a 'critical mass', but simply of the gradual change when the minority grows larger in an organization. The discussion of a critical mass adds to this the question of a possible point of acceleration in the influence of the minority when reaching a certain size, e.g. 30 percent.

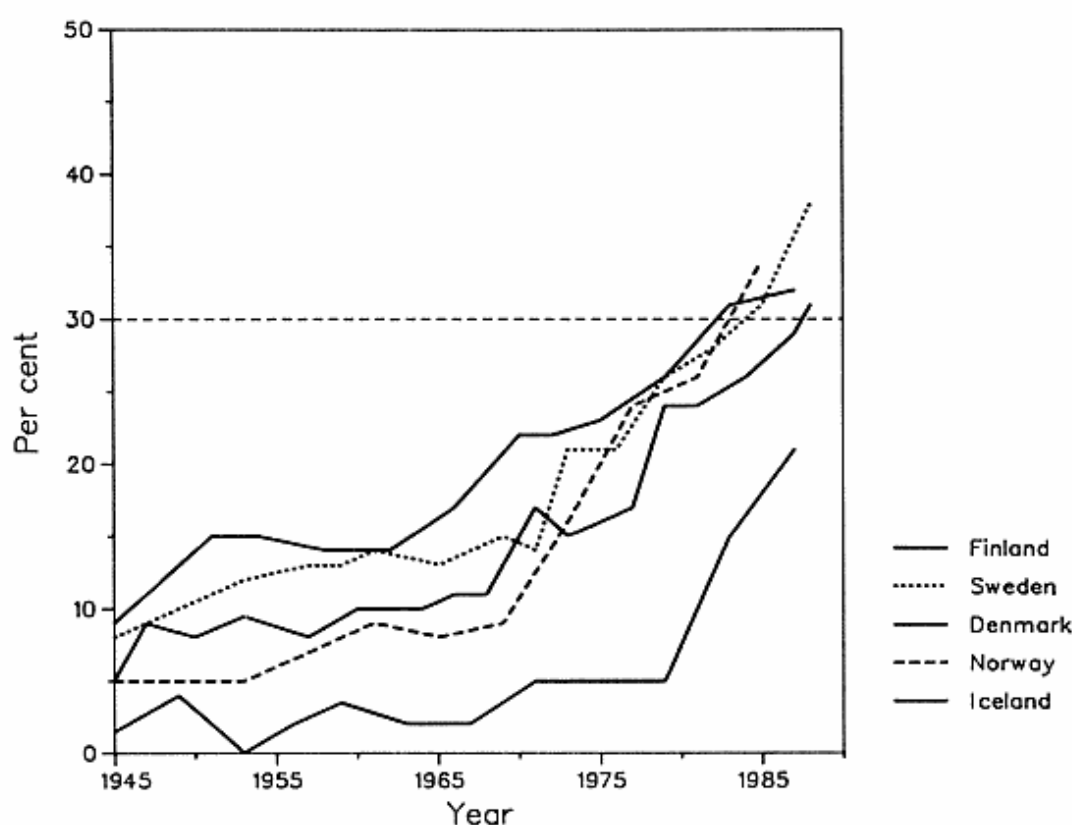


Fig. 1. Women's Representation in the Nordic Parliaments Since 1945. Percent. *Source:* Based on Haavio-Mannila (1985), table 4.3, updated.

Women in Scandinavian Politics

Increasing Representation

In the five Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, the majority of politicians are still men. But women's political representation has in fact increased rapidly during the last 10–15 years. Today, women occupy one fourth to one third of the seats in the Nordic parliaments and local councils, the highest percentage in the world.

Figure 1 traces the development of women's political representation in Scandinavia since 1945. For many years, Finland had the lead in women's parliamentary representation, but today Norway with its 34 percent and Sweden with 38 percent have overtaken Finland. Fifteen years ago, women's share of the parliamentary seats was between 5 percent (Iceland) and 22 percent (Finland). Just after the Second World War, women's political representation in the Nordic parliaments was as low as zero in Iceland, 5 percent in Denmark and Norway, 8 percent in Sweden and 9 percent in Finland.

During the first periods of women's suffrage and the whole interwar

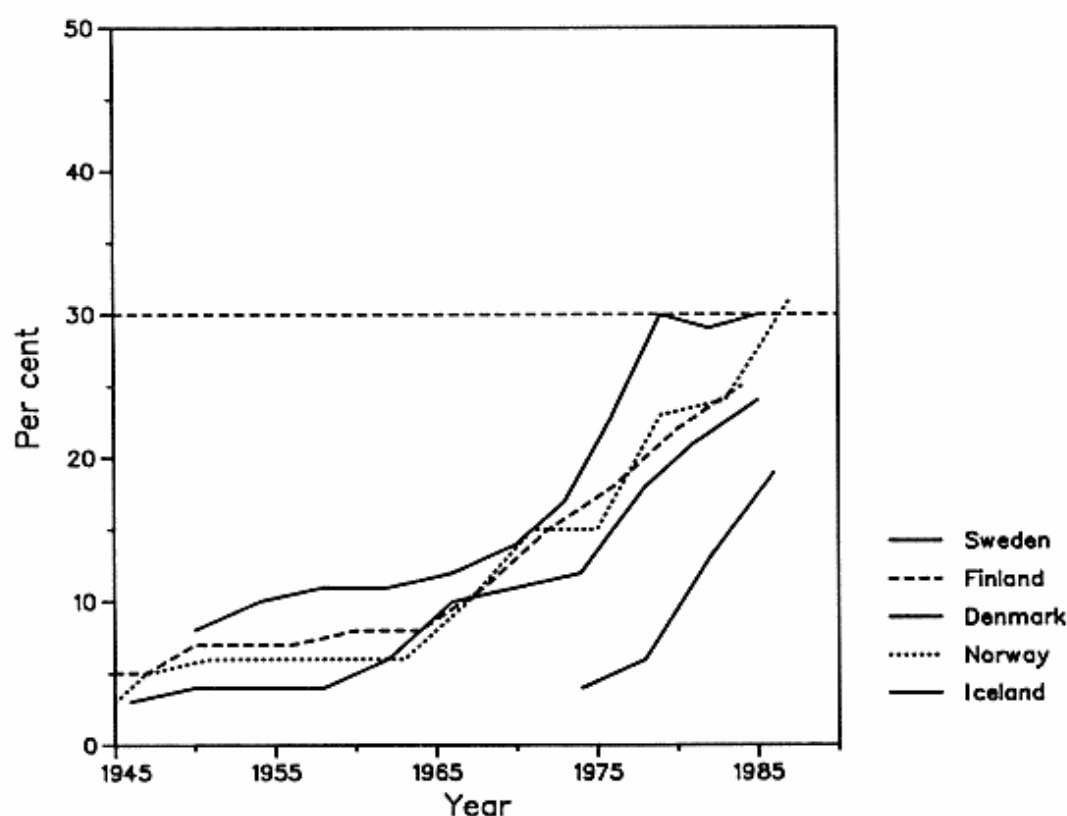


Fig. 2. Women's Representation in the Nordic Local Councils Since 1945. Percent. *Source:* Based on Haavio-Mannila (1985), table 1, addendum 6, updated. The Icelandic electoral statistics do not have figures on the gender of the elected.

period, women's representation remained very low, not showing any signs of increase. The growth came after the Second World War, and increasingly since the late 1960s.

Figure 2 shows the growth of women's representation in local politics. Here again we see that a rapid increase has taken place during the past 10–15 years. Women's representation in Icelandic politics is somewhat behind the other Nordic countries; however, a remarkable increase has taken place in recent years in Iceland.

Twenty years ago, almost half of the Danish municipalities (communes) had no women on the local council. Today, there is at least one woman on almost every local council, see Table 1. Most of the so-called 'black spots', e.g. communes without any women on the local council have disappeared from the political map.

A similar increase has taken place in the other Nordic countries. Again, Iceland with its many small rural communes is behind. Table 1 also reveals that a few communes in Norway, Denmark and Iceland have or have had a majority of women in the local council (maximum exceeds 50 percent).

Today there are about 12,000 women elected to the local councils in the

Table 1. 'The Black Spots'. Communes with no Women on the Council.

		Percent of all communes	Variation in numbers of women councillors Minimum-Maximum	
			%	%
Denmark	1966	42%	0-43	
	1981	0%	5-53	
	1985	0.7%	0-53	
Finland	1968	17%	0-33	
	1980	0.4%	0-48	
	1984	0.2%	0-49	
Iceland	1974	84%	0-29	
	1982	50%	0-43	
	1986	36%	0-60	
Norway	1963	34%	0-33	
	1979	0.8%	0-59	
	1983	0.6%	0-47	
	1987	0%	10-65	
Sweden	1971	2%	0-?	
	1982	0%	12-48	

Source: Based on Haavio-Mannila (1985), table 5.3, altered and updated.

five Nordic countries. Women are no longer an exception. The times of the first woman, the token woman, are over, except in some rural communes. In conclusion: Women are no longer a small minority in Scandinavian politics. Today, women constitute a large minority, although still a minority.

What Will Change with More Women in Politics?

The discussion of women as minorities in the corporations is basically about efficiency, dropout rates, performance and promotion. These factors are also important for elected women in politics. Politics is also a workplace. In politics, however, the most crucial element is policy content: Are women able to influence the policy outcome? Moreover, in politics we are dealing with representatives, not just individuals: representatives of a political party, an electoral district and a certain occupational group and perhaps of a gender?

What might change if the political representation of women increases? What kind of changes are we looking for? Here follows a list of aspects that seem to be important in this respect:

1. Changes in the reaction to women politicians.
2. Changes in the performance and efficiency of the women politicians.
3. Changes in the social climate of political life (the political culture).

4. Changes in the political discourse.
5. Changes of policy (the political decisions).
6. Increase in the power of women (the empowerment of women).

This list offers a more differentiated ground for discussion on the disagreement whether more women in politics is making any difference or not.

A similar list of aspects seems to be of relevance in the study of the entrance of other disadvantaged groups into the political arena, for instance working-class people and blacks of both sexes. Here we only deal with women as a group.

Changes in the Reaction to Women Politicians

It was difficult to start in the Folketing (the Danish Parliament) . . . Maybe it was not until I ended up in my parliamentary party group that I realized how much of a woman I really was. I have run a kindergarten, I have been head of a department, I have had a leading position at the teachers' training college. It has never bothered me to take on leading positions, I like that, I know how to handle it. But all my leading positions have been in the world of women.

Then suddenly I end up in that party group in Parliament, and here I experience a male chauvinism I did not believe existed, at least not in my own party. It was not just that they wanted to size me up because they did not know me – which I considered fair enough, but they wanted to size me especially because I am a woman and because I had replaced one of their old men . . . There was an enormous scepticism directed against me as a person and against my competence and my abilities. If anything has strengthened my feminist consciousness, it must have been to end up in that parliament group in 1973. (Interview with Ebba Strange, the Socialist People's Party in Denmark. Elected for the first time in 1973 in a parliamentary group of 3 women and 8 men. Since 1977 chair of the party's group in Parliament. In 1979 the Socialist People's Party became the first party to have a majority of women in its parliamentary group. Interview in Dahlerup 1985, 227.)

In a patriarchal society men are considered bearers of the 'culturally legitimated authority' (Rosaldo 1974, 21). If one's authority is never questioned, one can act kindly and mildly – and people will follow one's instructions. For women this cultural tradition means that they have to fight a lot to make people listen – or to be considered a potential leader. The virago is a consequence of this patriarchal tradition, not of the nature of career women.

No doubt the open resistance against women as politicians has been removed in Scandinavia. There is more room for women in politics today as women, and not just as politicians in spite of their gender. From earlier periods women have reported of sexist remarks and open exclusion practices not only by male voters, but also by some male colleagues who thought that women belonged to the home.

However, the only woman in the Parliament of the home-ruled Faroe Islands reveals that she still gets sexist remarks from her male colleagues. She also says that she has to justify her existence daily as a woman politician (Dahlerup 1985).

It is not possible to conclude that the removal of the open resistance against women politicians derives solely from their increased numbers today. We are witnessing a general change in attitudes among both men and women towards women in public roles. However, the presence of women politicians in great numbers does make it seem rather hopeless to try to remove women from the public sphere today. So numbers do count.

Stereotyping is another well-known problem for minorities, and several women politicians complain that the press treats them as either competent and cold or warm and incompetent (Dahlerup 1985). Cartoons showing women politicians have earlier been rather merciless. Following the growing number of women in politics, stereotyping decreases, because so many different types of women now occupy the political arena.

The removal of the open resistance against women in politics does not imply that women today have the same opportunities as men in politics. The fact that women are in the minority indicates the existence of barriers for women in politics.

Do women politicians experience discrimination, e.g. unfair treatment on account of gender? In my interviews with politicians I got four types of answer:

- a. 'There is no discrimination of women any more, rather the contrary', some women politicians said.
- b. 'Women are definitely discriminated against, but personally I have not experienced it', said another group.
- c. 'Women are not discriminated against', a third group told me, but later in the interview the same women related many unpleasant episodes that certainly seemed like discrimination.
- d. 'Yes', a fourth group answered and told rather bitter stories of resistance, sexism and male chauvinism – of how they had to fight to become accepted.

A Norwegian study of all male and female members of the local councils in 7 municipalities around Oslo (188 men and 72 women) shows that women politicians in their own opinion are treated differently because they are women. The study also shows a gap between men's and women's perception of this.

To the question, 'Are the demands made on female and male politicians different?', 48 percent of the women politicians – a substantial number – answered 'yes', and 13 percent of the men agreed; 35 percent of the women and 69 percent of the men felt that there is no difference between the demands put on women and those put on men.

Another question in this study reveals that women politicians feel under stress because of their gender: 51 percent of the women feel that less value is attached to the opinions of female politicians than to those of their male

Table 2. 'Generally speaking, would you have more confidence in a man or in a woman as your member of Parliament?' Percent replying 'more confidence in a man'

	Men			Women		
	1975	1983	1987	1975	1983	1987
Denmark	20	9	7	15	8	7
United Kingdom	37	27	15	31	27	17
Holland	28	19	16	23	16	12
Ireland	42	38	33	33	20	17
France	35	28	24	28	22	20
Italy	47	39	31	41	34	22
West Germany	53	45	30	37	30	19

Source: Men and Women in Europe in 1987, excerpt from annex B.3. The Commission of the European Communities (Eurobarometer survey).

colleagues; 18 percent of the men agreed. 'No difference' was the answer by 44 percent of the women politicians against 79 percent of the male (Hellevik & Skard 1985).

So even if the women politicians of this survey constitute a percentage, between 20 and 30 of their local councils on the average, their problems have not disappeared.

What do the voters think of women politicians? Table 2 brings some remarkable results from the Eurobarometer survey. In some countries quite a number of voters – men as well as women, but more men – answer that they have more confidence in a man as their representative in the national parliament; the alternatives being more confidence in a woman or that gender makes no difference. Since 1975 there has been a remarkable increase in the proportion of voters who think that the gender of the representatives makes no difference to them.

The table also shows that compared to other EEC voters, the Danish voters are by far the most egalitarian. We do not have comparable data for the other Nordic countries, but the attitudes here are probably quite similar to the Danish.

In conclusion: changes have taken place in the perception of women as politicians by the voters. And the open resistance to women politicians by voters and male colleagues in the political workplace has almost disappeared. Less open kinds of discrimination, differential treatment and 'techniques of dominance' (Aas 1980) still exists, however.

It is suggested here that the increased number of women as politicians has had an impact, although within the framework of a general change in attitudes towards women in public roles. There has also been a growing resistance by the women politicians themselves to discrimination of women.

However, it is not possible to conclude that these changes follow from any fixed number of women, e.g. 30 percent.

In this process of change, the example of just a few successful women in top positions, e.g. as prime minister or president may have contributed substantially to the change in the perception of women as politicians. In such cases it is not the numbers that count, but the performance of a few outstanding women as role models.

Changes in the Performance and Efficiency of Women Politicians

Of course one has to behave as naturally as possible and not make a fuss about oneself, but find one's place as one of them. But I feel more comfortable when there are some women. I do not know why. I had this feeling that the men in a way built a wall around themselves and their clever economic thoughts. (Interview with Elsi Hetemäki-Olander, vice chairperson and MP for the Conservative Party in Finland (Dahlerup 1985, 244).)

According to Rosabeth Moss Kanter's study, the 'failure rate' or turnover of women in a minority position in the corporation was considerably higher than that of their male colleagues. Kanter suggests that the dropout rate will decrease when the size of the minority increases.

The media in the Nordic countries often carry stories about women who quit politics because they are overworked or do not like the atmosphere in the political institutions. But what are the facts?

A quick look at the women in parliament reveals that during the interwar period, most of the few women MPs did occupy their seats for a very long period and did not seem to have had a higher dropout rate than the men. Most of the first women in the Nordic parliaments were very resourceful persons who survived for a very long time in the overwhelmingly male parliaments.

As for women in local councils, no longitudinal studies of dropout rates have yet been conducted. One study from the north of Sweden concludes that the dropout rate of female councillors is somewhat higher than that of the men, but the difference has diminished during the last decade (Fränstam & Gustafsson 1984).

A nationwide survey of Swedish local politicians concludes that today women do not give up their seats more frequently than their male colleagues. In general 25 percent of the local councillors withdraw voluntarily at each election, the rate being the same for men and women. And most of those who stand for re-election are actually re-elected. The female councillors in general have lower seniority than the men (the increase in women's representation being recent), but also within each seniority group men and women drop out at almost the same rate (Wallin 1981).

A survey of local councillors in Norway (Hellevik & Skard 1985) showed the men to be a little more willing than the women to stand for the next

election. Today's small or non-existent difference in dropout rates for women and men may be a new trend, but we do not actually know.

Why should the dropout rate fall because the proportion of women increases? One answer could be that the role conflicts of women politicians diminishes and that women begin to influence the political culture and hence begin to feel more at home in politics.

However, more women in politics does not in itself diminish the family obligations of women and the conflict between the need of the family and the political work. It was in fact easier to combine family and politics previously a former woman MP has pointed out to me: 'Because in the past we all had housemaids'.

The Swedish survey (Wallin 1981) shows that family obligations are still an important reason for women breaking off their political career. The retiring politicians were asked the reasons for their retreat. The result was that women more frequently than men decided to withdraw because of family obligations (45 percent of the women as against 26 percent of the men listed family obligations as one of their reasons); 33 percent of the male politicians and 41 percent of the female mentioned problems in combining political activity with their job.

The most appalling result was that women much more than men listed dissatisfaction with their own performance as politicians as one of the reasons for quitting (35 percent of the women, only 8 percent of the men). The lack of personal influence was listed by 22 percent of the women as against only 9 percent of the men.

The Norwegian study of local politicians (Hellevik & Skard 1985) shows that 33 percent of the women politicians thought that their points of view did not influence the outcome against only 14 percent of the men.

According to these studies, women politicians feel less satisfied with their job than their male colleagues, but nevertheless they stay on with almost the same frequency. So even if they constitute 20 to 30 percent today, women politicians have not obtained what one could call equal opportunity of carrying out their work as politicians.

Change in Political Culture

In the WOC survey from 1984 I asked all national women's organizations, women's committees and equality committees within all political parties in the five Nordic countries the following question: *Do you believe that more women in politics will lead to changes in working conditions and social conventions in politics?* To this question, all women's organizations and committees, except one, answered 'yes' or 'certainly'. Some added: 'but only if women are many'. What will change according to the women's organizations:

- the tone will be softer in politics
- the meetings will be arranged with more consideration to family obligations – fewer late meetings, fewer meetings between 4 and 7 in the afternoon, no more meetings in restaurants!
- meetings will be less formal and less ceremonious
- shorter speeches, less formal language, more to the point.

'We believe that women, much less than men, want power in itself. The ways of working and the interaction will become more characterized by cooperation and solidarity, not so much by competition', the Women's Groups of the Danish Socialist People's Party write.

'Politics will probably become less formal. But democracy demands certain decision-making procedures which women just like men cannot avoid', the Social Democratic women's organization in Sweden states.

'Yes, changes to the more social and less tough climate. . . . But many things, among them the workload, will hardly decrease', writes the Equality Committee of the Agrarian-Liberal party in Denmark.

Most interesting is that several women's organizations write that the women politicians not only will but already have changed the political workplace.

The political women's organizations seem to be in agreement on most of these points. This unity does not necessarily reflect a traditional and uniform women's culture in society. Rather, it is a reflection of recent criticism in Scandinavia of politics and the politicians, especially brought forward by women. However, a parallel might be drawn between these recent arguments and those used in the suffrage campaign that women, as more peaceful beings, could change the hard climate of politics and remove the political dirt (Dahlerup 1978).

The political culture is a complex issue which political science until now has not paid sufficient attention to. Regarded as a workplace, political life has its social conventions, its tone, its formal and informal rules, and norms of cooperation and conflict. This 'way of doing politics' varies from country to country, commune to commune, and it changes over time. Often politicians themselves are unaware of these variations.

The individual woman in an organization dominated by men is often faced with a dilemma. Either she lives up to the norms of how women behave, and keep her female style, with the consequence that often she is not really accepted as a colleague. Or she may to some extent adapt to the style of the men, and consequently the public will call her a 'man-woman'!

The political culture has changed somewhat during the last decades throughout Scandinavia. The traditional formal style and the authority of the politicians has diminished. The increasing number of women in politics is probably part of this development, which some will regret, others welcome.

Even if women politicians as a minority have been forced to and have to some extent wanted to adapt to the prevailing political culture, I will argue that the presence of women in the assemblies in itself makes some change. We know now that the entrance of just one woman into an all male group (and vice versa) changes the discussion and behaviour of that group. We all behave differently in front of a woman or a man. Remember the confusion and anger many people feel when confronted with a young person of unknown gender. I will argue that an increasing number of women politicians in itself changes some of the social conventions of politics as a workplace, because most of these women, not all of them, bring into the political institutions traits of women's culture as it manifests itself today, e.g. taking care of newcomers, consideration for the private problems of others, less tough style of debating, etc.

The higher the proportion of women in politics, the more social conventions will change, although again it is not possible to identify a special turning point, a critical mass. But numbers do count, even if the politicians themselves and the public are not aware of it.

But political culture is more than the social conventions of politics. The high level of conflict in politics seems to bother many female politicians ('politics is a football game to male politicians!'), but this is one of the many aspects of the political culture that women politicians do not seem to have been able to change. While changes in social conventions may happen without so many considerations, it takes a deliberate effort to change the more fundamental aspects of the political culture. Since politics is not physics, we should look for *critical acts*, not for a *critical mass*.

In recent years, several political parties have tried deliberately to introduce new ways of doing politics. Heavily influenced in their culture by the new social movements, especially by the new women's movement, political parties like the Greens and Left Socialist Parties have emerged and old parties have changed.

Here we have seen a conscious attempt to introduce new forms of politics and attempts to avoid being absorbed by the old political culture. It is characteristic that women have played a prominent role in these new or reformed parties.

The most radical attempt to reform the prevailing political culture comes from the new Women's Party in Iceland, introduced in local elections in Iceland in 1982 and in the parliamentary election in 1983 with remarkable success. The Women's Party tries to stay a social movement, and argues that women must form their own party because the traditional political parties absorb women on male premises (Styrkársdóttir 1986):

... in the political parties, women are not being listened to, when we speak with our 'women's voices'. Women have to play according to the rules of the men in order to be heard, and they have to be better and tougher than the men to play the rule of the game

to make it in politics. (Interview with Gudrun Agnarsdóttir and Kristin Halldórsdóttir, members of the Icelandic Parliament since 1983 for the Women's Party (Dahlerup 1985, 90).)

Changes in the Political Discourse

Concerning the question of equality between men and women, allow me to quote President Lincoln. He said: 'I do not understand this discussion about equality between woman and man. The woman always was superior to man'. (Said in Parliament, 30 May, 1984 by a member of right wing Progress Party in Denmark in a debate about financial support to women's studies at the universities(!).)

The political discourse is the language of politics, and the language and meaning attached to the different political issues. This includes also the discussion of what is considered political, and what is suppressed from the political debate by tradition or direct exclusion (Dahlerup 1982).

For a very long time, women's position in society was not subject to serious political debate in the Nordic countries. Most politicians did not have a vocabulary to speak about women's position, discrimination, inequality, women's diseases, unpaid labour, division of work between the sexes, sexual harassment or sexual violence against women. Such issues were left to 'Nature'. With the exception of a few progressive politicians and the women's organizations themselves, most Danish politicians even had problems with pronouncing the word 'women' without using various euphemisms.

Today, women's position has entered the political discourse. As the quote above reveals, most, but not all, politicians in the Nordic countries are able to discuss such matters. For some it may be lip-service. However, the discourse has certainly changed.

Even if women politicians do not agree politically on many issues, an effect of a growing number of women in politics could be that the way to talk about women's position and the priority given to such issues changes. Again, we cannot isolate the effect of the growing number of women politicians from the effect of what happens outside the formal political arena. What we can see is that the issues of women's position in society have been placed on the formal political agenda by women politicians. Also, it is easy to see how the women politicians influence the way these issues are debated in parliament and the local councils. But more studies are needed in this field before we conclude.

Fifty percent of women on the councils is not just a vision for the future. In Scandinavia there are few examples of a female majority on a local council (see Table 1). None of these majorities has lasted long, and none of them changed politics fundamentally, which clearly shows that 30 percent women, or even a majority, does not in itself change everything, as some might have wished.

Although exceptions can be found, the political discourse, however,

seems to change somewhat, not only with the feminist debate in society in general, but also with the growing number of women politicians:

I am convinced that the peaceful revolution which has taken place during these three years (of female majority on the council) has formed the basis of a continuous cooperation between women and men. 'The women's coup' led to changes in mentality. In the previous period, when I sat as a deputy, it was almost impossible to gain a hearing for issues like playgrounds, preschooling and equality between men and women. In the present period, we have achieved what we wanted, namely that the men have started taking an interest in matters that only women considered before. (Quote from a woman politician on the City Council of Oslo after the period of female majority as a result of the electoral 'coup' by women at the election of 1971 (Skard 1979, 105).)

Change in Policy

I believe that the greatest danger for feminism is not that no women get elected at all, or maybe only a few. The greatest danger is that only such women are elected that we cannot consider our representatives because they have absolutely no understanding of the idea of feminism. Surely this will often be the case if we leave it to the political parties to decide which women to nominate for election . . . (Said by Gyrithe Lemche, a leading figure in *Dansk Kvindesamfund*, one of the biggest Women's Rights Organizations in Denmark, in *Kvinden og Samfundet*, 1915, no. 13.)

Many leading suffragists, among them Gyrithe Lemche, had a vision that women's entrance into politics would change both the political culture and laws. In a vehement debate other parts of the suffrage movement contested that women should change politics or maybe even form a women's political party. To them the suffrage was a matter of justice to women and not a means to introduce new values into politics. These different points of view were expressed in all Western countries around the introduction of votes for women (Dahlerup 1978). Today, the same differences are found in the debate about whether more women in politics will make a difference as regards political decisions.

In the WOC questionnaire sent to all women's organizations within the political parties in the five Nordic countries, I asked the following question: *Do you believe that more women in politics will lead to changes in what political issues are brought forward?*

Except for one 'may be', all women's organizations within the political parties answered 'yes'. Many added: 'if there is a sufficient number of women, since the few women cannot make much difference'.

More women in politics will mean that more emphasis will be put on family matters, environment, equality between the sexes, child policies, and sexual policy (sexual violence against women, pornography, prostitution), most women's organizations answered. Different priorities in defence and security policy was another, but less frequent answer, mostly coming from left wing parties, whereas the Christian parties added 'more resources for the handicapped and the elderly'.

'Women's experiences are different from men's, and therefore women

look different at many political issues', many women's organizations answered in the survey. 'More emphasis on "soft" values', was also a common answer.

Women in politics have already made a difference, some of the women's organizations pointed out. It is obvious that women have new points of view.

We know that not all individual women politicians will answer this question in the affirmative, but the survey showed that all women's organizations within the political parties both wish and hope that more women in politics will change the political decisions.

The debate on this issue is somewhat confusing. First, there is the question of coalitions: Does making a difference mean that all women should form a coalition across party lines? The women MPs truly dislike this idea, because in Europe they are all elected on different party platforms. Or should women within each party make their voices heard and form coalitions with other women within the party?

Secondly, what ideas should these women bring forward? Values representing women's traditional culture? Or modern feminist ideas? Or ideas representing the points of view of different groups of women, e.g. by bringing the views of the unskilled women workers into the working class parties, the views of the farmer's wives into the farmer's parties, or by expressing the different voices of socialist and liberal women?

Carol Mueller, an American scholar, maintains that a new type of woman politician is on the way. Carol Mueller has found that a growing minority – but still a minority – among women politicians in the USA expresses feminist attitudes. According to Carol Mueller's interviews, an increasing number of women politicians also perceive themselves as representatives of women (Mueller 1982). Are women in Scandinavian politics also becoming more feminist? A growing feminist consciousness among a growing number of women politicians could mean that women are reaching an important turning point, becoming a critical mass.

Scandinavia seems to differ from the USA in this respect. Not because of a lower proportion of feminists among women politicians than in the USA, but because feminism among women politicians in the Scandinavian countries is nothing new.

Many of the Scandinavian women politicians in the interwar and postwar period were active in the feminist movements of their time, whereas the typical American female member of Congress was a widow who stepped in after her husband's death.

At a rare moment in the history of the Danish parliament in the 1930s, in a debate about women's position, all spokespersons from the four largest political parties were women – and all of these women sat together as members of the executive committee of the *Dansk Kvidesamfund*, at that

time the largest Women's Rights organization in Denmark. So feminist attitudes among women parliamentarians are certainly nothing new.

But history does show some changes. The traditional female politician who worked hard for the sake of the children, the handicapped and the elderly in the 1940s and 1950s seems to have been replaced by a more conscious and assertive type of feminist, following the strong feminist debate and the emergence of the new women's movement in the 1970s.

In their study of local councillors today, Hellevik & Skard (1986) asked the women councillors two sets of questions: the first dealing with their opposition to the way women are treated in politics, the second asking about their feminist attitudes and whether they saw themselves as representatives of women, had raised questions of special interest to women in the local council, had participated in collaboration between women across party lines in the council, and whether they had any contact with women's groups outside the local council.

Hellevik & Skard summarize that only a minority of the women politicians are neither in opposition to the treatment of women nor show any involvement in feminist matters. On the other hand, only a tiny minority answered yes to all questions. Hellevik & Skard conclude that it is not the most outspoken feminists that have been recruited to the local council.

It is interesting to note that Hellevik & Skard find a high correlation between opposition and feminist involvement. The interpretation might be that the most involved women are also those most critical of the treatment women get, in other words, the same reality is perceived differently dependent on the feminist attitudes of the observer. An alternative interpretation is that the reality for those who raise feminist issues is different from that of the non-involved, because feminist activity is met with strong resistance from male colleagues (Hellevik & Skard 1986).

My interview with women politicians confirms that women politicians – in their own view – are met with negative reactions or even sanctions if they are 'too' feminist. 'Feminist involvement gives you bad marks', a Norwegian politician says (Dahlerup 1985, 198).

But the woman who said so is herself a feminist and became a minister at the age of 32, and is now serving her second term. So even if many women politicians report that feminist attitudes harm one's career, in Scandinavia today we are witnessing feminists becoming ministers. The same can be seen in a few other countries. And this is new, and in itself creates new resources for changing public policy.

It is, however, obvious, that the opportunity for women to form majority coalitions with male colleagues across party lines, or more likely within each political party, increases when they constitute 30 percent, rather than 5 percent. This is a question of power. The crucial point is whether women politicians develop some common ideas they want to fight for. Also here

we must turn the question of a critical mass into a question of critical acts by the women politicians. In the Nordic countries women politicians have conducted critical acts on selected issues. These are described in the following.

Change in Women's Power

The empowerment of women implies a growth in influence and power not just of individual women, but of women in general. Individual women may make it to the top, but here the focus is on changing the disadvantaged position of women in politics in general.

Does the increase in women's political representation accelerate as recent electoral results seem to suggest (see Figures 1 and 2)? Will more women in the assemblies lead to a relative increase in women's share of the political leadership? That remains to be seen. However, the old 'iron law', that the number of women is inversely proportional to their rank in the power hierarchy (the higher up, the lower the relative proportion of women), does not seem to hold true any more.

The increase in women's political representation has changed several aspects of women's position in politics, without making any revolution and without removing all barriers.

Are there not changes in a negative direction? Is it always beneficial to women to become a large minority? A Swedish politician has expressed the view that she was doing better in fact in the local council when she was the only woman. As the only woman, she had the advantage of being considered the expert on women's issues, and – due to a kind of chivalry from the men – she was also able to get on exactly the committees she wanted. When woman number two entered the council after the following election, this unique position changed, partly because the two women were of very different opinions (Dahlerup 1985). Of course, there are examples like this one.

However, significant changes in the political system and changes for women as a group have indeed occurred following women's entrance into the political institutions. It is argued here that although it is very difficult to isolate the effect of the growth in women's political representation from the general social development, certain changes may without much hesitation be connected with the increase in women's political representation, that is, with the move from a small to a large minority:

- the stereotyping of women diminishes without being removed totally
- new role models of women in public life are created
- the social conventions are somewhat changed, even if the main feature of the political culture remains untouched
- the open resistance against women politicians is removed – now it seems hopeless to bring women back to the house

- still fewer voters express negative attitudes to being represented by a woman

Other changes, such as changes in the political discourse on women's issues, and the fact that equality between the sexes reached the political agenda in the 1970s and 1980s, are difficult to attribute directly to the growth in women's political representation, because they are so heavily influenced by what happened outside the political institutions. However, women politicians no doubt played an important role in bringing these new points of view into formal politics.

A critical mass? Does 30 percent women in politics accelerate the development? As shown in this article, it is difficult to apply the idea of a turning point following from a growth in the size of the minority to the social science. Human beings do not act automatically like particles. Only on one point, namely changes in the social climate, does it seem relevant to talk about a kind of 'automatic' change when the minority grows large.

Maybe we should replace the concept of a *critical mass* with the new concept of a *critical act*, better suited to the study of human behaviour. A critical act is one which will change the position of the minority considerably and lead to further changes.

Most significant is *the willingness and ability of the minority to mobilize the resources of the organization or institution* to improve the situation for themselves and the whole minority group. For women in politics this constitutes critical acts of empowerment. Here are some recent examples of critical acts by women in Scandinavian politics.

a. *When Women Politicians Recruit Other Women.* In my interviews with women politicians in the five Nordic countries I asked them if they deliberately work to recruit other women? Surprisingly, almost everyone in the sample answered 'yes'.

Without being able to prove it, my assumption is that the very same question posed twenty years ago would have made most women politicians feel uncomfortable. At that time the usual answer would have been 'I look for the quality of the individual candidate, not at the gender'. Women were recruited in spite of their gender. Today, from their improved influence in the nomination committees and in the party leadership, many women politicians – and some men – work deliberately to recruit more women. The women politicians have accepted the point that in a world of systematic differentiation between women and men, sex-neutrality is probably impossible, in fact often a blind for selecting men. With the growth of this attitude, more women in politics will lead to further increases in women's political representation.

b. *Quotas for Women.* Ten political parties in the Nordic countries have now introduced quotas (often a minimum of 40 percent to each gender). The resistance was often intense, but nevertheless the proposals were carried through by a joint action of women in coalition with groups of supporting men. A large minority, much more easily than a small one can form a majority coalition.

The introduction of quotas for women is on the one hand a consequence of women's growing political influence. But more important, it constitutes an institutional resource for future mobilization of women. 'After the introduction of quotas, we do not have to fight again and again for the representation of women', it has been said (Dahlerup 1988).

In 1981, women in the left-wing People's Alliance Party in Iceland for the first time formed a coalition at the party congress and succeeded in getting almost 50 percent women elected to the Central Committee of the Party. Next step was the introduction of quotas for women, followed by a democratization of the meetings in the party and other reforms to make the party 'more human' (Dahlerup 1988).

The large Norwegian Labour Party introduced quotas in 1981 to internal bodies and in 1983 also to the party's lists for public elections. The principle was implemented by the central party organization. The result was that after the election in 1985, women constituted 42 percent of the Labour Party's group in Parliament. In the Norwegian case, the women used their new strength in the internal party organization to ensure the next step: implementation of quotas for women on the party list for the election. After the 1985 election, the woman Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, appointed a cabinet of half men and half women.

c. *New Legislation and New Institutions.* The last examples of critical acts to be mentioned here are the new kind of equality policies introduced in the Nordic countries in the 1970s and 1980s. In all five countries, as in many other countries outside Scandinavia, Equal Status Councils and Equality Ombudsmen have been established. These new agencies constitute the first institutionalization of the equality policy, which was previously conducted solely as pressure group politics by voluntary associations. Although their resources and influence are limited, these new agencies exemplify the mobilization of institutional resources for improving women's position. Also in the regional labour market authorities, in the public administration and in large firms and trade unions, staff is now being hired with equality politics as their area of responsibility. Fifty years ago, feminists would not have dreamt of a situation in which people would actually get paid to work for the equality between women and men.

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