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Norwegian gender-equality policies in national branding

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Creating a national brand might entail a polished version of realities and facts on the ground. Branding is, after all, image-building. How, then, are Norwegian gender-equality policies presented in national image-making? In this chapter, we investigate how the national branding of Norway takes form through the voicing and silencing of various features of Norwegian gender-equality policies. Gender-equality policy is a hybrid policy field that encompasses a range of different areas. The emphasis here will be on what we have identified as the four main areas of Norway's gender-equality policies: equality legislation, work–life balance, gender mainstreaming and gender balance in decision-making (Skjeie et al., 2019).¹

We base our analysis on the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' most recent action plan on gender equality, together with selected speeches by the minister of foreign affairs and the minister of children and equality. We view these documents as core sites of communication to foreign audiences on Norwegian gender-equality policies and ask how their main messaging relates to existing knowledge about the features, merits and shortcomings of these policies. Our primary focus is the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Action Plan for Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Foreign and Development Policy 2016–2020, entitled *Freedom, Empowerment and Opportunities* (hereafter: 'Action Plan') (MFA, 2016a), the ministry's most important communication document on gender equality. In addition, two other documents contribute to framing the main messaging articulated in this Action Plan: first, the speech by former minister of foreign affairs Børge Brende (2013–2017) at the launch of the Action Plan (MFA, 2016b); second, the statement by former minister of children and equality Linda Hofstad Helleland (2018–2019) at the 62nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) (Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equality, 2018). These two statements are both thematically relevant and were made on prominent occasions. They therefore serve as central additional instances of branding, and the issues that are highlighted within them overlap overall with the focus and priorities of the Action Plan.

The question we ask is how Norway recommends gender-equality approaches and policy solutions abroad, and to what extent perspectives and

solutions promoted internationally take on board existing analyses of Norway's own experiences and policy challenges. A central finding in our analysis is that the branding abroad of Norwegian gender-equality policies in some important respects disregards our knowledge of the limitations and deficiencies of these policies. Further, and more surprisingly, some of the recognized strengths of Norwegian gender-equality policy are downplayed.

Nordic gender equality in nation-branding

A key insight from studies of nation-branding is that 'branding matters'. The aim of different nation-branding strategies is to influence how countries are perceived by both state- and non-state actors in the international community. Such branding efforts aim to influence macro-economic variables (GDP, exports, etc.) or diplomatic relations (see, for example, Fan, 2005). However, they may also shape citizens' perceptions of their own country and ideas of what, for instance, the 'welfare state' or 'gender equality' refer to and ought to imply at home (Danielsen et al., 2015; Marklund, 2017). A country's economic, political and cultural position in the international system, as well as a government's standing among its own citizens, is thus not straightforwardly given by some objective circumstances. A nation's status is also shaped by less tangible means, such as image-building, both at home and abroad.

Effective branding, however, needs to correspond with certain agreed-upon realities to be credible. For example, when countries in the Nordic region find it useful to brand themselves as gender-equality forerunners (see, for example, Towns, 2017; Jezierska and Towns, 2018), this image-building is supported by the fact that these countries top international gender-equality indexes and the number of people living 'gender equal' lives within them tends to be greater than that in other regions. A successful branding strategy is based on comparative advantages – for example, in relation to levels of environmental pollution or a country's record on human rights or gender equality (see, for example, Fetscherin, 2009, and Chapter 9 in this volume by Hellum) – and on toning down any possible shortcomings. But to what extent do we find this simple pattern of over-emphasizing achievements and covering up flaws when we examine the treatment of Norwegian gender-equality policies in the country's national branding?

There are several existing and ongoing studies of the role of gender equality and gender-equality policy in the national branding strategies of the countries of the Nordic region. These studies find, first, that internal controversies spurred by mobilization and policies for gender equality in the Nordic countries are toned down or silenced. Such controversies include conflicts between Nordic gender-equality ideology and multiculturalism, or attacks on 'feminism' coming from the populist right – for example, Sweden's Democrats (see Towns, 2017). Second, some studies have highlighted

how the notion of gender equality brought to the fore in Nordic nation-branding as ‘Swedish’ or ‘Norwegian’ is not necessarily progressive, but diplomatic and ‘tamed’ (see Towns, 2002; Tryggestad, 2014; Moss, 2017; Jezierska and Towns, 2018; Skjelsbæk and Tryggestad, 2018, 2019), in the sense that more radical features of the feminist agenda are downplayed. For example, more fundamental questioning of gender and sexuality categories and societal power relations remains unmentioned. Third, historical legacies and national self-conceptions developed over time about Nordic countries as champions of women’s rights (Danielsen et al., 2015), but also about Nordic gender, including ‘Nordic masculinity’ (Syse, 2017), play a central role in establishing the trajectories and legacies of gender-equality policies. In our analysis, we relate our findings to these existing contributions, but also pursue a reading inspired by postcolonial feminist theory.

Slippage between home and abroad

The Nordic countries have been portrayed as ‘nirvanas’ of gender equality (Lister, 2009) or – more soberly – as a group of countries more characterized by equality than others (Walby, 2004, 2009). However, gender-equality policy and discourse in the Nordic countries has also been accused of tending to ignore plurality, diversity and individual autonomy (Holst, 2002; Borchorst and Siim, 2016; Martinsson et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the four areas of gender-equality policy outlined above have been recognized as pivotal policy innovations originating in the Nordic countries (Skjeie et al., 2019).

As for Norway, our focus in this chapter, the country has, first, well-developed equality legislation, which was primarily home-grown in the early period but in recent years has been widened and advanced as an effect of the integration of EU law and UN frameworks. Although there is variation between them, the Nordic countries share clear similarities, with Norway and Sweden being the most alike, as their equality legislation, enforcement and monitoring have developed in tandem, while Finland and then Iceland were latecomers who have subsequently levelled up with the other Nordic countries. Generally, Denmark deviates, having the least developed and most restrictive approach to equality legislation, enforcement and monitoring (Borchorst et al., 2012). Still, there are significant limitations in the monitoring and enforcement system in Norway, as well as in the other Nordic countries. Second, welfare-state services and benefits that enable parents to combine work and family life have contributed to high levels of female employment in Norway. Nevertheless, the labour market remains relatively gender-segregated, and EU integration has brought to the fore new challenges, such as the risk of benefit export and discrepancies between Nordic-style family policy and the EU’s equal-treatment and anti-discrimination regime. Third, gender mainstreaming is embraced in Norway in theory, but remains largely unenforced in practice. Fourth,

and finally, quota arrangements have contributed to high levels of gender balance in political decision-making, while significant gender imbalances remain in other societal arenas, not least in the business sector.

Below, we will lay out in more detail these features of Norwegian Nordic-style gender-equality policy before providing an assessment of how each area is addressed in communications to the outside world.

Equality legislation

Norway was an ‘early achiever’ in terms of legislating against gender-based discrimination: As early as in 1978, a comprehensive law on gender equality that covered ‘all areas of society’ was passed by the Norwegian parliament. This legislative initiative also established the world’s first Gender Equality Ombud and Gender Equality Tribunal as a low-threshold mechanism.² From the outset, Norway’s gender-equality legislation combined bans on direct and indirect discrimination with regulations related to proactive advancement of gender equality. Proactive duties for state agencies and public and private employers form a central part of the country’s current equality legislation. In addition, over the past two decades, advances in EU law and a stronger commitment to complying with UN requirements in the wake of the 1995 Beijing Conference have resulted in a significant broadening of legal protection against discrimination in Europe. This development has also contributed to significant changes in Norwegian equality legislation (Skjeie et al., 2017, 2019). The first Norwegian moves to legislate against discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity or religion were made in the late 1990s through amendments to the Work Environment Act. Comprehensive equality laws aiming to cover not just gender but also racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age and sexual orientation – the EU’s ‘six strands’ of anti-discrimination policy (Krizsan et al., 2012) – have had a profound impact on Norwegian gender-equality legislation enacted from 2005 onward. In relation to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, comprehensive legislation was passed in 2013. The different legal provisions regarding protection against discrimination on various grounds were collected together in a new unified equality and anti-discrimination act, modelled on the initial gender-equality act, in 2017.

The low-threshold enforcement and monitoring system of the Ombud and the Tribunal entails significant limitations, however.³ For instance, very few discrimination cases have been taken to court (see *Norges offentlige utredninger*, 2011; see also Hellum and Blaker Strand, 2017; Ketscher, 2019). Despite recent amendments to strengthen low-threshold enforcement (see Holst, 2020), Norway’s ambitious equality and anti-discrimination legislation has mainly functioned as a symbolic legal statement. Compared with broad welfare-state initiatives on public childcare and parental-leave schemes, individual and systemic discrimination have received scant attention in Norway (Skjeie et al., 2017).

As one might expect, the importance of firm and well-developed gender-equality legislation is a key point in the Action Plan (MFA, 2016a). We see this clearly in formulations that repeatedly emphasize the rights of ‘girls’ and ‘women’s rights’ to ‘autonomy’, ‘freedom’, ‘self-determination’ and ‘empowerment’. Rights to gender equality and protection from discrimination are framed as basic rights tied directly to international agreements and obligations, such as the UN human rights conventions and the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, the 1995 Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals,⁴ as well as the EU’s Charter of Fundamental Rights, anti-discrimination legislation and gender-equality programmes (MFA, 2016a: 5–7).

Within the Action Plan, Norway – or a national ‘we’ – is positioned at the forefront of these developments. Not only is ‘our work on women’s rights... based on international human rights obligations’ (MFA, 2016a: 5), but Norway’s membership in international organizations in which women’s and human rights are promoted and developed means that these are also central arenas where ‘we... contribute to international gender equality efforts’, channel ‘our gender equality and non-discrimination efforts’ (MFA, 2016a: 7), and in different ways ‘mobilize’ for gender equality (MFA, 2016a: 12). The foreign minister’s presentation of Norway’s international role in his speech at the launch of the Action Plan gives a parallel impression: ‘When it comes to gender equality,’ he states, ‘Norway is a superpower’ and a ‘global leader’.⁵ In her CSW statement, the minister of children and equality does the same by positioning Norway both as a country where ‘women are given the same opportunities as men’ and as a ‘prosperous and gender equal country’. Norway’s achievements are then contrasted with the situation in many other countries, where existing legislation does not respect gender equality and the need for protection against discrimination. The Action Plan, for example, takes up how ‘formal discrimination in national legislation is still widespread, particularly in the area of family law, but also in the areas of inheritance and property law’ (MFA, 2016a: 8). Similarly, when the foreign minister stresses anti-discriminatory equality legislation as a universal requirement for Norway, he comments that ‘we cannot tolerate that religion, culture or traditions are used to discriminate against girls and women.... Human rights are universal. They apply to all. Everywhere.’⁶

It should be noted, however, that the references in the branding documents to rights and legislation are generic⁷ and do not identify specific features of Norway’s gender-equality legislation. This also means that no references are made to those features that have been central to Norwegian legislation, such as a concept of discrimination that includes both direct and indirect forms of discrimination, the role of proactive duties, and, more recently, the development of a broader corpus of anti-discrimination legislation that connects gender and other dimensions, such as ethnicity and sexuality. This general avoidance of specificity also conceals the enduring problems that we are

familiar with in the Norwegian legislative context. These include limited implementation and enforcement, which tend to make equality legislation symbolic-legal declarations with limited real consequences.

Furthermore, whereas Norway's role as an international norm entrepreneur and norm-pusher in the international arena is mentioned repeatedly, the branding documents make no mention of instances where the EU and other international judicial frameworks have 'pushed' for amendments to Norway's equality legislation. Moreover, as conflicts between international gender-equality obligations and national legislation are framed as happening 'elsewhere', incidents in which Norway has been accused of not living up to international standards in its own legislation do not enter the picture.

Uncertainty around whether Norway's family policy is in accordance with the EU's anti-discrimination directive was tried legally in 2019 (Case E-1/18). This challenge to Norwegian policy occurred in the wake of the *Maistrellis* case, in which the European Court of Justice ruled that the Greek government could not deprive the father of the right to parental-leave benefit on the grounds that the child's mother was not in employment (*EUR-Lex*, 2015). Similarly, Norway's parental-benefit scheme makes the father's entitlement to paid parental leave dependent on the mother being in work or education. Such requirements do not apply for the paid parental leave of the mother. In the first round of legal assessment, the European Free Trade Association Surveillance Agency (ESA) found this regulation to be in violation of the EU's equal-treatment directive. However, when Norway appealed the decision to the EFTA court, the court dismissed the case, arguing that the Norwegian parental-leave benefit scheme falls outside the scope of the directive's ban on unequal treatment in hiring and working conditions.⁸

Accordingly, the case of Norway vs. the EFTA court ended in favour of Norway's policy of treating mothers and fathers differently in terms of the right to use the parental-leave scheme. However, the controversy brought into question the notion of Norway as a 'global leader' in gender equality and as favouring the 'same opportunities' for women and men. Arguably, this was rather a case of the EU pushing Norway towards a more progressive stance, not the other way around, and, importantly, we find this even in the area of family policies, which have been a key pillar in the Nordic societal model (for overviews, see Skevik and Hatland, 2008; Leira, 2002, 2012; Ellingsæter, 2014).

Work–life balance

Gender-equality-oriented family policies constitute a main sub-area of Norway's gender-equality policies. Over time, a range of family- and parent-friendly services and benefits have been institutionalized in Norway. The development of publicly subsidized kindergartens, daycare centres and out-of-school care has been a priority at least since the 1990s, and Norway is currently regarded as having full kindergarten coverage. Paid parental leave

has been extended over time, and is now 49 weeks at 100% coverage (or 59 weeks with 80% coverage), where some weeks are reserved for the mother, some for the father, and some are shared. In addition, there are rights for parents to unpaid long-term leave to care for newborns and small children, a right to paid leave of absence for nursing mothers, and a right to paid leave to care for sick children. A set of special benefits for single parents is also in place. There is also a universal child-benefit scheme for anyone supporting children under the age of 18. In addition, there are tax benefits for families and a cash-for-care benefit for parents with children that do not attend state-sponsored nurseries (Vollset, 2011).

The outcomes of these policies are high levels of female employment and a strong integration of women in higher education and the labour market in Norway. Yet, in spite of these important markers of gender-equality success, the Norwegian labour market is characterized by high levels of horizontal gender segregation – men and women concentrate in different occupations and professions – and vertical gender segregation – prevalent male dominance in top positions, which is especially evident in the business sector (Reisel, 2019).

Surprisingly, a work–life–balance perspective on the family is relatively absent in the Action Plan, with the exception of some background passages.⁹ In the sections on family planning and topics such as gender-based violence, rape and female genital mutilation (Chapters 4 and 5), the family institution is presented primarily as something from which women need protection and that needs to be curtailed or avoided.

Strikingly, it is only at one point in the Action Plan that reconciliation between family and work is made an explicit topic. This occurs in a passage on women's weaker position in business and industry, where the fact that women tend to have 'a greater workload in the family than men' is brought forward as one of several factors explaining gender inequality.¹⁰ The role of men as fathers, and their opportunities to balance work and family/fatherhood, is absent from the document. This is striking given the importance often assigned to the role of fathers in advancing gender equality for women in the family and in working life. It is also striking because so much weight, nationally, is put on the need for fathers to have an independent relationship with their own children. However, Norway's decision to appeal the case it lost in the ESA judgement, concerning the right of fathers to access the parental-benefit scheme irrespective of the mother's activity, indicates that this concern in the end yields to other, presumably more important concerns – in this case, mothers' employment vs. equal treatment of mothers and fathers.

In line with this almost silencing of issues related to the work–life balance, the Action Plan neither reflects nor addresses solutions to the challenges faced by women – and men – in relation to combining full participation in economic and political life with family life and parenthood, or how to even out women's 'greater workload' in unpaid caring and house work.

The avoidance of this issue is noteworthy given how the Action Plan gives women's participation in the labour market, in politics and in society in general the highest priority, and how other means of increasing female participation – for example, by ensuring women's equal economic rights and education and supporting women's organizations in civil society – are given substantive treatment (MFA, 2016a: 15–21). Indeed, the complete absence from the Action Plan of a work–life–balance approach and a discussion of the role of family policy of some kind is rather remarkable, particularly given Norway's own experiences in these areas and the fact that parental-leave schemes, family-friendly public services and publicly subsidized kindergartens are highly regarded in terms of their role in facilitating high levels of female employment and women's political participation in national policy-making and public debate. Family policies are not addressed in the foreign minister's launch speech nor in the minister of children and equality's CSW statement, which also emphasize the importance of women's participation and equal opportunities between women and men, and repeatedly mention 'education', 'female entrepreneurship', 'economic rights' and 'access to productive resources' as instrumental for achieving this, while leaving out work–life issues and family policy. In this way, Norway promotes itself as a gender-equality leader and equal-opportunities regime, while making few references to the women- and family-friendly social policies that have arguably been key for these achievements.

Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming has been the official strategy of gender-equality policy in Norway for 40 years – that is to say, since the adoption of the Gender Equality Act in 1978. The mission statement of the Act was 'to promote equality and in particular the position of women' (§1a). To fulfil this aim, it was stated that 'all public authorities shall facilitate for gender equality in all areas of responsibility' (§1b). Since the late 1990s, the gender-mainstreaming strategy also corresponded with a stronger prioritizing of gender-equality policy within the EU, including equal-opportunity policies opening for positive action and institutionalization of gender-sensitive norms and practices in public policy more broadly (Hafner-Burton and Pollack, 2002, 2009).

Gender mainstreaming is a challenging approach because it requires that all central actors analyse the gender aspects of any policy process. Gender mainstreaming in Norway presupposes that equality efforts should be integrated into the daily work of all authorities, in all decision-making processes and by all relevant actors. However, reviews of the implementation of mainstreaming activities in national, regional and local public administration have made clear that such activities are scarce (Norges offentlige utredning, 2011). Although gender mainstreaming is anchored in the activity duty of the Gender Equality Act and in government instructions for policy preparation, where an obligation to conduct gender-sensitive consequence

analysis has existed since the mid-2000s, there has been no monitoring of such written obligations. No comprehensive gender budgeting is in place; no systematic assessment of consequences for gender equality in legislation and policy formulation has been carried out; equality work has mainly been geared towards temporality in the form of various action plans on different areas; and there has been little equality expertise available to guide equality-eager authorities. In short, there seems to have been a one-eyed focus on gender-equality ‘integration’, in parallel with a limited understanding of how effective integration needs separate institutions with sufficient resources, capacity and authority to push, plan, guide and monitor.

When we turn to Norway’s conceptualization and promotion of gender equality in the international arena, gender mainstreaming appears as a key strategy and connects to the emphasis on the UN’s role and UN conventions and structures. Concretely, gender mainstreaming is connected to the Beijing Platform For Action and highlighted in the Action Plan as an approach that ‘commits governments to integrate a gender perspective into all policies and programmes’ (MFA, 2016a: 9).

The Action Plan is quite specific about how the gender-mainstreaming approach is to be implemented. It highlights, for example, how Norway will seek to ensure that multilateral development banks integrate gender equality as a systematic concern in their core activities and thus report on female job creation and women’s economic rights, especially in precarious areas (MFA, 2016a: 20). According to the plan, Norway will ‘promote effective implementation of the World Bank’s gender-equality strategy’, integrate gender equality in work ‘to advance private-sector development’ (‘for example through Norfund’s¹¹ agreements with the companies it has invested in’) and promote inclusion of gender-equality concerns in UN organizations, such as the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (MFA, 2016a: 20).

At the same time, it is also emphasized that gender mainstreaming is a demanding strategy. Gender mainstreaming entails diverse and complex questions, and coordination and comprehensive work, along with strategic priorities, are necessary to achieve mainstreaming goals.¹² What is noteworthy from the perspective of Norway’s own experiences, however, is, first, how gender mainstreaming as a strategy is not highlighted as something with longer and deeper roots in Nordic gender-equality policy and legislation. Instead, gender mainstreaming is framed largely as a Beijing 1995 innovation and as growing out of UN processes. Second, even if it is made explicit that gender mainstreaming is a ‘challenging’ strategy, the systematic failures of implementation in Norway, a gender-equality ‘superpower’, are not mentioned or drawn upon to assist the formulation of lessons learned. Illustratively, the lack of separate responsible resource organizations to oversee and enforce ‘integration’ – a likely key explanation of Norway’s own unimpressive record in this area – is not listed among the obstacles to effective gender mainstreaming.

Gender balance in decision-making

Quota policies and preferential-treatment arrangements are a hallmark of Norwegian gender-equality policy. Quotas applying to the nomination procedures of political parties have been sequentially adopted since the late 1970s; in relation to appointments to public boards and commissions since the 1980s and 1990s; and – most famously – for the membership of corporate boards since the early 2000s (for an overview, see Skjeie and Teigen, 2012; Teigen, 2018). Interestingly, the regulation on gender quotas for corporate boards was not included in the Gender Equality Act, but was made part of company law, to ensure stricter enforcement. The sanction system specifies that a company that does not have a board that is in compliance with the legislation will be given several warnings (followed by fines) to allow it to correct the matter. If, despite these measures, it fails to comply with the legislation, it will then be subject to forced dissolution. This case thus constitutes a clear exception to the general trend of weak enforcement mechanisms in Norwegian equality legislation.

Various forms of preferential-treatment policies have long been in place in relation to admissions to higher education and hiring within such institutions, as well as within public administration in general. Yet, in 2003, a case before the EFTA court decided against the University of Oslo's targeted earmarking of specific postdoctoral positions. The earmarking arrangement was found to violate the European Economic Area agreement as it reserved certain positions exclusively for women (Norges offentlige utredninger, 2012: 498), and the further interpretation of this decision by the Norwegian authorities put new limitations on a hitherto favoured preferential-treatment tool of Norwegian gender-equality policy.

Quota policies and preferential treatment have also had varying results in terms of ensuring more gender-balanced decision-making. In Norway, as in the other Nordic countries, a discrepancy exists between the relatively balanced representation of men and women in political decision-making, on the one hand, and high levels of vertical gender segregation in the labour market, especially in the business sector, on the other (Teigen and Wängnerud, 2009; Niskanen, 2011; Teigen et al., 2019).

Women's participation in central societal arenas is also a key point in all the reviewed documents. In accordance with this, the strong underrepresentation of women in political decision-making and governing bodies worldwide is presented as a major challenge to gender equality, both in the two ministers' speeches and in the Action Plan.¹³ In the Action Plan, 'women's political rights and empowerment' is singled out as a key priority and thematic area, and as crucial to ensuring all 'their democratic freedoms and rights' (MFA, 2016a: 15). Norway will thus 'engage in normative efforts' in the international arena to foster gender balance in politics, to support actors who engage in the process of increasing the presence of women in political processes, and to ensure a stronger participation among women in peace

processes and negotiations (MFA, 2016a: 15–17). In line with this, the minister of children and equality stresses the importance of ‘gender-balanced government’ in the opening passage of her speech at the CSW, while the foreign minister emphasizes how ‘power’ is crucial for gender equality ‘because we cannot accept that women only constitute 22% of the parliamentarians of the world because we cannot accept the glass ceiling that continues to exist in many places for women in the private sector’.¹⁴

In other words, there is no question that the Norwegian government speaks very clearly about the need to achieve gender balance in political decision-making. Moreover, in this area, Norway is repeatedly depicted as a pioneer country: ‘Just think about how our own society has developed because of women’s participation in politics,’ states the foreign minister in his Action Plan launch speech,¹⁵ before going on to emphasize how Norway consistently works for women’s political participation in the international arena, during times of war and peace, through the UN and through support for human rights activism and social justice.¹⁶ On this point, however, there is more ambivalence in the CSW statement: ‘Still, even in our prosperous and gender-equal country,’ the minister of children and equality notes, ‘men dominate positions of power. We see it in finance, law firms, academia, and in our main rural industries – fisheries and agriculture. Where power and money dominate – men prevail.’ Although this is just one instance, this is a reminder of the persistent challenges Norway faces regarding both vertical and horizontal gender segregation in the labour market.

Still, what remain consistently silenced both in the speeches and in the Action Plan are the policies that have been instrumental in Norway’s ‘prosperity’ in this area, and how gender-quota policies specifically have been adopted to promote gender balance in decision-making assemblies, from parliaments to corporate boards.¹⁷

Silencing and voicing patterns revisited

From our outline above, the gender-equality policy promoted internationally by Norway deviates quite substantially from the priorities of the country’s domestic gender-equality policies. Norway has an advanced equality legislation, subscribes to a gender-mainstreaming strategy, and has high rates of female employment and relatively high levels of women’s representation in decision-making bodies. Clearly, some of the aims and instruments promoted in the branding documents overlap paths and approaches in gender-equality policy at home. It also makes sense that the Norwegian government in these documents highlights Norway’s efforts abroad to support gender-equality initiatives and the judicial and policy frameworks of the UN and other international organizations. Norwegian nation-branding also directs attention to the fact that Norway is a high achiever in the gender-equality area when compared to many other countries, and it is only

to be expected that the government would highlight these credentials for international audiences.

It is harder to understand why some of the features of Norwegian gender-equality policy that are widely recognized as fundamental, and that in research and national policy discussions are considered central to the country's high achievements in the gender-equality area (see Skjeie et al., 2019), are left out. As we have learned from the branding literature, successful nation-branding typically promotes recognized successes and comparative advantages. On this basis, we should expect Norway to boast about its policy innovations and well-functioning approaches and instruments in gender-equality policy. Why are advantages such as an equality and anti-discrimination legislation that emphasizes proactive duties, work-life balance policies set up to enable the combination of equal parenthood and equal labour-market participation, and the contribution made by the introduction of electoral quota policies to women's presence in political decision-making not put forth as major achievements that other countries could learn from? It would appear that some of the characteristics of Norwegian gender equality that would seem the most brandable have been left conspicuously unbranded.

Existing scholarship on gender equality in Nordic-style national branding suggests that branding patterns may reflect a toning down of radical feminist questioning of gender and sexuality norms that are unpopular and controversial among some home audiences. On this point, there may be some non-trivial inter-Nordic differences. To our knowledge, all the Nordic countries brand themselves as gender-equality promoters to the international community. However, whereas Sweden, for example, explicitly brands its foreign policy as 'feminist', Norway has been reluctant to use that term (Skjelsbæk and Tryggestad, 2019). The difference between Norway and Sweden accords with a general finding of differences between the Norwegian and Swedish gender-equality discourses. The differences between the two are harder to detect, however, when it comes to actual policies and gender relations (Teigen and Wängnerud, 2009; Teigen and Skjeie, 2017; Goul Andersen and Shamshiri-Petersen, 2020). Further, gender-equality policies in the Nordic region – family and quota policies and equality legislation – are well-known among national audiences, have the characteristics of 'social democracy' (Holst, 2018) and are not particularly controversial at home. National policies to promote improvements in gender equality receive relatively high support across voter segments (Hellevik and Hellevik, 2012; Midtbøen and Teigen, 2019). Thus, it is hard to see why there would be a need to downplay them and some of their well-known merits to placate domestic audiences and avoid controversy.

Existing studies of gender equality in Norwegian nation-branding also point at relationships between branding patterns and distinctive historical legacies – for example, how Norway over the centuries has been highlighted as a forerunner when it comes to women's participation in political

and economic life (Larsen, 2017). Still, it is not clear why this legacy would rule out straightforward talk about the policy and legislative prerequisites of participatory credentials.

For attempts to understand this omission, we believe postcolonial interventions in feminist theorizing (Zuckerwise, 2014; see also Martinsson et al., 2016) can be helpful. One prominent strand of postcolonial feminist critique has argued that Western feminism and gender-equality ideology has prioritized Western problems above gender and other injustices and developmental challenges in other regions and cultural contexts. However, also an almost opposite pitfall has been highlighted in the claim that Western gender-equality proponents have failed or hesitate to recognize that problem definitions and struggles for gender equality in both non-Western and Western contexts may have shared features. In these instances, the underlying conception of the world seems to be that the ‘non-Western’ situation is, for one thing, somehow and overall shared, and, second, fundamentally different from the more advanced situation in the West. This worldview is then combined with a linear narrative in which ‘they’ are positioned at a ‘less developed’ stage, not yet ready to be introduced to ‘our’ more developed problems and policy exchanges. These assumptions are all obviously problematic given the great variation in cultural, social and policy contexts in both Western and non-Western parts of the world that result in similarities and differences across countries and regions that do not fit easily into any simple linear, dichotomous scheme. However, it is a perspective that may assist us in illuminating the more puzzling aspects of the branding patterns we have identified. Seemingly, it could make sense to leave out even the most recognized of policy successes, such as the merits of Nordic-style family policy. This may even be the case on occasions where a central rationale is to make ‘our nation’ shine, if the fundamental contentions are that these successes are not remotely relevant to ‘them’, since their situation and policy challenges are of an essentially different and ‘early-stage’ kind.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have investigated how the branding abroad of four main areas of Norwegian gender-equality policy corresponds with – or deviates from – our knowledge of policy qualities and effects recognized in research and national policy discourse. With some exceptions, we found that Norwegian national experiences regarding policy failures, as well as instances where Norway has been at the receiving end of international policy diffusion, are largely put aside. This is not surprising in the light of scholarship on national branding that sees ‘good’ branding as emphasizing successes while downplaying negative effects. The almost systematic downplaying of Norwegian policy achievements in the gender-equality area – from family policies to quota arrangements – is harder to make sense of. Inspired by postcolonial feminist theory, we suggest that a certain linear narrative that

distinguishes between ‘our’ advanced policies and policy problems, on the one hand, and ‘their’ less-advanced challenges, on the other, can help us illuminate this key aspect of the identified branding patterns.

There are some limits to our study and analysis. For one thing, our approach would benefit from an analysis of more branding documents and an expansion of the range of methods used – to include, for example, interviews with relevant governmental staff – which would enable us to check the extent and strength of the patterns identified here. Comparative studies between the Nordic countries would also be useful.

Still, despite these limitations, we believe the descriptive conclusions that we have presented from our research so far deserve attention and follow-up studies. They also raise new research questions. There may, for example, be feedback loops between how policies are presented and branded to the outside world and national policy conceptions (Marklund, 2017).

Competing accounts of the patterns identified in the present study must also be considered more closely. First, it could be argued that in this chapter we have placed too high demands on political speeches and generally framed action plans of the kind we have been analysing. We find that the documents we have studied address the policy and regulatory levels of gender-equality politics only in very limited ways, and maybe this is no less than we should expect in the type of discourse we have scrutinized. Yet, even if the documents we have reviewed have a sketchy approach to policy, they touch upon a range of substantive policy references and priorities. It is difficult to see how also including references to Norwegian family policy or some of the more detailed characteristics of the national equality legislation would somehow be discursively ‘impossible’.

Second, differences between policy areas and between the focus of specific ministries – for example, between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Children and Equality – may play a role. Yet, our broader reading so far suggests that the inter-ministerial differences on this point are limited.¹⁸ It is also possible that the political colour of the government matters. Conservative governments, for example, may tend to emphasize female entrepreneurship and girls’ equal access to education more than quota and family policies. Still, foreign affairs is among the policy fields least characterized by party-political cleavages.

Importantly, it could be argued that some of the branding patterns that have puzzled us reflect how criticism from postcolonial feminism and similar corners has actually been taken on board by Norwegian policy-makers and is reflected in their branding strategies. We should not ethnocentrically assume that policies that work in the Nordic region – be these parental-leave schemes or gender quotas in corporate boards – are realistic, workable options in other parts of the world. Hence, maybe the omissions we find, for example, in the Action Plan are quite sensible given the social and cultural situations and policy contexts that are addressed therein.

Yet it is not obvious that the policies that are listed in plans and emphasized in speeches are easier to implement and would work better outside the Nordic region (the strategy of gender mainstreaming, mentioned repeatedly in the Action Plan, is known to have failed in most contexts so far). Considering the recent wide spread of electoral quotas all over the globe (Dahlerup, 2006; Krook, 2008) and the international diffusion of work–life balance norms, also in UN contexts, we should also be careful to think of measures such as quotas and parental-leave schemes as ‘utopic’ proposals once we leave the Nordic context.

Notes

- 1 This choice of themes obviously leaves out other core areas, such as violence against women, gender perspectives on health and equal-pay policies. Still, we argue that the four areas on which we focus have been particularly central to official gender-equality policy and allegedly Nordic innovations (Skjeie et al., 2019).
- 2 A low threshold implies that it is easy and free to make a complaint about discrimination.
- 3 The system of enforcement of the equality low threshold means that it is easy to make a complaint; however, the system is only able to decide upon whether discrimination has occurred and lacks sanction mechanisms.
- 4 UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 is to ‘achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’.
- 5 ‘Når det kommer til likestilling, er Norge en supermakt.’ ‘Norge er en global leder. Vi er i front for jenters rett til utdanning.’
- 6 ‘Frihet fordi alle mennesker skal bestemme over eget liv. Likestilling gir frihet til både kvinner og menn.... Muligheter fordi alle jenter og kvinner skal kunne bruke sine evner. Alle jenter og kvinner skal kunne gi sine fullverdige bidrag til samfunnet. Vi kan ikke tolerere at religion, kultur eller tradisjon brukes for å diskriminere jenter og kvinner. Dette er kjernen av problemet. Dette må motarbeides uansett hvor det skjer. Menneskerettighetene er universelle. De gjelder for alle. Overalt. I FN’s bærekraftsmål nummer 5 forplikter vi oss til å oppnå likestilling for jenter og kvinner.’
- 7 For example, when it is stated that ‘Norway will promote the development of non-discriminatory legislation through the UN’s normative processes and support at country level, [and] compliance with, and implementation of, legislation relating to women’s rights’ (MFA, 2016a: 17).
- 8 The argument was that the Norwegian parental-leave benefit is not an employment or working condition in the context of the equal-treatment directive. Hence, the activity requirement for the mother is not in violation of the directive. For the EFTA decision, see EFTA Court (2019).
- 9 For example, in the general introduction to the Action Plan:

The fundamental aim of Norway’s gender equality-efforts is to increase the opportunities available to women and girls, promote their right to self-determination and further their empowerment.... Norway will help to ensure that women gain a stronger position in the family, in the community and in the international arena.

(MFA, 2016a: 5)

- 10 'Women encounter various obstacles that prevent them from participating in business activities and in the labour market in general, and are overrepresented among those working under unacceptable conditions. There are political, economic, legal, cultural and other structural obstacles to women's participation in the labour market. Women in fragile situations are at particular risk of discrimination and exclusion. Women have less control over the world's resources than men. They also have a greater work load in the family than men, both in developed and in developing countries. This means that they compete in the labour market on less advantageous terms than men. In many countries, disparities in economic, political and legal rights, and social and cultural obstacles, are the greatest barriers to women starting up, running and further developing their own businesses. Examples include women's lack of property rights and restrictions on women's access to bank accounts. This means that the transition from the informal to the formal sector is often time-consuming' (MFA, 2016a: 18).
- 11 Norfund is an investment company owned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- 12 'Experience shows that mainstreaming the gender perspective is challenging. The approach to this work has not been strategic enough. In addition to the priority areas set out in the Action Plan, the Ministry will identify specific areas for active mainstreaming of gender equality and women's empowerment. In other areas, we will carry out risk assessments of projects to ensure that they do not have any negative consequences for gender equality and women's empowerment. These steps are necessary in order to concentrate our efforts and ensure that they produce results' (MFA, 2016a: 31).
- 13 However, 'a slight increase in the number of women members of parliament' is recognized: 'The figure today is 23% compared with 12% in 1995.'
- 14 'Makt fordi vi ikke kan akseptere at kvinner kun utgjør 22 prosent av verdens parlamentarikere, fordi vi ikke kan akseptere at glasstaket fortsatt er intakt mange steder for kvinner i privat sektor.'
- 15 'Det andre området i planen er kvinners politiske deltakelse. Det å ha en stemme til å påvirke beslutninger er essensielt. Tenk bare på hvordan vårt eget norske samfunn har utviklet seg på grunn av kvinners deltakelse i politikken.'
- 16 'Norge arbeider for kvinners politiske deltakelse, i situasjoner med krig og konflikt, så vel som i fred og utvikling.... Vi vil fortsette å ta dette opp i FN. Vi vil fortsette å støtte menneskerettighetsforsvarere som står i fremste linje i kampen mot urett.'
- 17 Gender quotas have also gained a prominent position internationally as a way of regulating gender balance in political decision-making and corporate boards (Hughes et al., 2017; Piscopo and Clark Muntean, 2018; see also International IDEA, n.d.), and are an important factor in the increase in women's presence in politics in many countries. Interestingly, the latter is highlighted in the Action Plan, but not connected to the significance of quota measures.
- 18 Consider, for example, Minister of Children and Equality Solveig Horne's speech at the *She Decides* conference in Brussels, 2017, where the persistent challenges of gender segregation in Norway were left unmentioned.

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