

## Promoting gender equality in the Riksdag 2018–2022



## **The Riksdag is celebrating the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage - but just how gender-equal are we?**

The Riksdag should be gender-equal. Members of the Riksdag should have the same actual conditions and opportunities to perform their official duties regardless of gender. By highlighting gender equality issues, the conditions for achieving a gender-equal Riksdag can constantly be improved. This is the point of departure for the Working Group on Gender Equality in the Riksdag chaired by the two of us, and with one representative from each party. Our work is based on a decision taken by the Riksdag in 2006, stating that the Riksdag is to work to promote gender equality. Since then, a number of measures have been taken on the basis of the gender equality action programme established by the Riksdag Board for each electoral period. It is this work that we are now developing.

A study of gender equality in the Riksdag from the last electoral period shows that female and male members of the Riksdag feel that they have equal opportunities when it comes to exercising an influence and having political impact.

However, the group consisting of young women feel that there are greater challenges. They feel that they are questioned to a greater extent, and that they are expected to be better informed than other groups. There are also problems with domination techniques and abusive treatment. Women also feel, in general, that greater demands are placed on them and they are more worried about making mistakes.

Another factor that affects the assignment as an MP to an increasing extent is threats and violations, primarily via social media. This applies to both women and men, but the violations take different forms depending on gender.

A parliament with a work environment that meets the needs of both women and men should be a matter of course. This is what the voters expect too. It should be possible for an elected representative to carry out his or her assignment fully. The Riksdag Board's action programme for the current electoral period therefore focuses on how we treat one another. We also want to increase knowledge and awareness within the Riksdag of how gender affects both power and influence.

During the 2018–2022 electoral period, the Riksdag is also commemorating the fact that 100 years have passed since universal and equal suffrage was introduced in Sweden, and the first women entered the Riksdag as MPs. The purpose of the celebrations is to generate engagement and understanding of the importance and development of democracy in Sweden in a historical perspective, and for the future.

With this brochure, we want to tell you about previous and ongoing work with gender equality. Our goal is never to lose momentum - gender equality is a question of democracy, and measures to promote gender equality are ever topical.



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**(Social Democratic Party)**

First Deputy Speaker and  
Chair of the Gender  
Equality Working Group



**Lotta Johnsson Fornarve**  
**(Left Party)**

Second Deputy Speaker and  
Deputy Chair of the Gender  
Equality Working Group



Deputy Chair Lotta  
Johnsson Fornarve and  
Chair Åsa Lindestam  
of the Gender Equality  
Working Group.  
photo: anders löwdin.

## Background

Compared to other parliaments, the Riksdag has a relatively high proportion of women MPs; 47.3 per cent after the 2018 elections. However, the high level of representation of women MPs is quite a new phenomenon. In the early 1970s, the proportion of women in the Riksdag was 13 per cent. The figure then rose steadily to 38 per cent in 1988, but fell in the following elections. In the 1994 elections, women obtained 43 per cent of the seats in the Riksdag, a figure that has remained at around the same level ever since.

It was not until well into the 20th century that Swedish women were given the right to vote and the opportunity to be elected as members of the Riksdag. However, demands for equal suffrage had been a major political issue ever since the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century.

The Riksdag took a decision to introduce universal and equal suffrage for men and women in 1919. The reform was implemented at the initiative of the coalition government at the time, which consisted of liberals and social democrats.



Kerstin Hesselgren and Elisabeth Tamm, two of the first female MPs.  
photo: tt

After the 1921 elections, five women entered the Riksdag. The proportion of women in the Riksdag increased slowly in the following years. This was especially the case in the First Chamber, with its eight-year electoral periods and indirect elections. In the Second Chamber, where MPs were elected directly by the voters every four years, the increase was somewhat quicker.

### **Factors that affected the increase in the number of women in the Riksdag**

Thus, the true breakthrough for women's participation in Swedish politics has taken place in the last 35–40 years. Important factors for this development are the proportional electoral system combined with a political culture based on gender equality. This gender equality stems from the fact that the political elite in Sweden has, from an international perspective, a more varied, and less privileged, background. Strong and progressive women's movements, both organisations with party political affiliations and independent movements, are also regarded as having had a great impact on this development.

Other significant factors are the early development of the Swedish welfare state and the rise in the number of women in gainful employment. From the 1930s until the mid-1970s, a number of reforms were implemented with an important impact on the possibility for men and women to combine family and professional life, including maternity – and later – parental insurance, child-care reforms and the introduction of individual taxation.

The fact that most political parties in Sweden have aimed to achieve a better gender balance has been decisive in increasing the representation of women in the Riksdag. Many political parties have taken special measures such as quotas to achieve gender-balanced party lists.

### **The women's parliamentary work**

When the first five women entered the Riksdag, two of them became ordinary members of the Riksdag's standing committees. The other three were assigned posts as deputy or alternate members. The committees in which

the women were placed did not have any permanent areas of responsibility, but were established on an ad hoc basis. Later, a different pattern emerged.

Women members primarily worked in committees that dealt with matters relating to the family or other social issues – “softer” issues. Few women worked in committees responsible for taxation, economy, transport, industry or defence.

For ten years, from 1982 until 1991, three committees stood out as “women’s committees”: the Committee on Social Insurance, the Committee on Health and Welfare and the Committee on Cultural Affairs. At times, between 60 and 70 per cent of the ordinary members in these committees were women, a much higher proportion than in other committees. In the late 1990s, this pattern started to change. Today, the women members are more equally distributed among the parliamentary committees, and the same applies to the positions of chair and deputy chair in the various committees.

There is a high level of awareness of gender equality issues in Sweden today. In the Riksdag, which is now a unicameral parliament, there is also a unique representation of men and women who are aware of today’s conditions and are therefore good decision-makers. It is important to take advantage of this as it strengthens our democracy. But at the same time, we need to look more closely at how female and male members of the Riksdag are treated in their political groups, in the Chamber and in public life, for example, in social media.

## **Promote gender equality**

In order to briefly describe the modern history of gender equality work in the Riksdag, we will cast our minds back to the year 1995, when the Speaker at that time, Birgitta Dahl (Social Democratic Party) invited women MPs, one from each party in the Riksdag, to a meeting. She wanted to discuss how they could join forces to maximise the benefits of the Riksdag’s good gender representation.



Many fruitful thoughts and ideas arose from this discussion and the meetings that followed. One of them resulted in the establishment of the childcare services for the children of members of the Riksdag, and another in the decision to introduce fixed voting times - all in order to make it easier to combine political work with family life. Within the framework of the Speaker's Women's Network, activities emerged in the form of meetings and seminars for all members and employees, both men and women.

The tradition of a cross-party women's network was continued by subsequent (male) Speakers.



Women and men in the Swedish Parliament in session. photo: anders löwdin.

Following discussions in the network, the Social Democratic party group in the Riksdag submitted a written communication to the Riksdag Board in 2003 with a number of proposals on ways to improve gender equality in the Riksdag. The overall objective of Sweden's gender equality policy is for women and men to have the same opportunities, rights and responsibilities in all significant areas of life. The initiative eventually led to a decision

by the Riksdag in 2006 that the Riksdag would work systematically to promote gender equality, and that the Riksdag Board would establish an action programme for gender equality for each electoral period.

The purpose of the action programme was to promote gender equality in parliament, especially qualitatively. Qualitative gender equality means that female and male MPs should have the same genuine opportunities to work in the Riksdag. It was also decided that the Riksdag's gender equality work would be followed up and evaluated. The Riksdag Board has now adopted an action programme for each electoral period since 2006.

### **How gender equal is the Riksdag?**

Prior to the Riksdag decision of 2006, interviews were carried out with randomly selected MPs representing all the parties in the Riksdag. A summary of the answers indicated that the Riksdag was not yet gender-equal but was well on its way to becoming so. However, some of the respondents considered that the Riksdag was characterised by the same gender structures that dominated society as a whole. A few years later, MPs were once again interviewed on the subject of gender equality. The responses revealed that certain shortcomings remained, but that on the whole the picture was brighter than it had been previously. Among the more critical voices, there were mainly women MPs.

In 2015, within the framework of the action programme for the electoral period 2014-2018, a survey was conducted among the members of the Riksdag. The survey was followed up with in-depth interviews. The studies showed that the members of the Riksdag were, on the whole, satisfied with the working environment and the way they were treated at the Riksdag, but that there were certain problems with domination techniques and violating behaviour. Threats and violations, primarily via social media, were having an increasing impact on the assignment as an MP. This applied to both women and men, but the violations took different forms depending on gender.

The studies further showed that women and men felt that they have equal opportunities when it comes to exercising an influence and having political impact, but that women generally felt that greater demands were placed on them and were more worried about making mistakes. The



answers to the interviews conducted with the members indicated that the differences between women and men may be due to the fact that women place greater demands on themselves, but the individuals who participated in the studies, both women and men, also felt that expectations on women and men differed.



The Gender Equality Working Group. From the left: Mats Berglund (MP), Joar Forssell (L), Alireza Akhondi (C), Lotta Johnsson Fonarve (V), Louise Meijer (M), Åsa Lindestam (S), Linda Westerlund Snecker (V), Tomas Kronståhl (S), Ebba Hermansson (SD) och Désirée Pethrus (KD). photo: anders löwdin.

Another picture that emerged was that young members of the Riksdag as a group, and especially women, felt that it was difficult to reconcile the assignment as an MP with family life.

## **Action programme for the electoral period 2018–2022**

The overall goal of the 2018–2022 action programme is to work for a gender-sensitive parliament. For the Riksdag, this can be summarised with the following objectives:

- there shall be an equal gender distribution in various bodies and contexts;
- gender equality work shall be integrated into activities and various processes;
- we shall have an internal culture that is characterised by respect and equal resources for both women and men;
- the balance between official duties and family responsibilities shall be facilitated;
- both women and men shall take part in gender equality work.

In the light of the findings of the earlier studies, the focus of this period will be on matters relating to internal culture such as how we treat, address and approach those around us.

## **Closing remarks**

The large proportion of women MPs has made the Riksdag into one of the world's most gender-equal parliaments. This has generated great attention internationally and has also fostered hopes for what changes of this kind may mean for the development of democracy in the future.



