

"It's a Question of Priorities". Women's Conditions and Interests in Local Politics.

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Abstract

Örebro is a municipality having had a high representation of women in local politics even as long ago as the 60s. The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate, on the basis of feminist theory, the conditions and conception of reality of Örebro's local politicians, focusing especially upon the woman politicians. The basic hypothesis of the study is that there are a number of constant differences between the men and the women with regard both to situation and to conception of reality, and that the conditions to which women's political outlook and actions are subject are in part different from those affecting men. The conditions affecting women are investigated on a fundamental level in terms of culture, women's culture and male-dominated political culture. The main questions the study seeks to answer are the following:

- (1) Under what conditions are women active in local politics?
- (2) What interests do the woman politicians regard themselves as representing?
- (3) What possibilities have they of articulating and acting for women's interests, and what are the obstacles to this?

Three methods have been used for data collection: questionnaire to all women and a selection of men with official functions in local politics, interviews with 30 of the women, and observation of 18 meetings. The woman politicians' life-patterns and political backgrounds were to some extent different from those of the men. The women had a stronger link to care - in choice of occupation, in areas of political interest and in their own political initiatives. A majority of the women appeared to feel a sense of fellowship with other women, appeared to identify with other women. Concerning the conditions facing women in politics, the men's questionnaire answers diverged sharply from the women's. Different sorts of social and care questions were considered by most of the women interviewed as being women's questions. The women were well aware of the various techniques of domination to which they were subjected in the male-dominated political culture. Their counter-strategies were chiefly indirect and collective, involving mutual support and encouragement. The women's sense of unity and solidarity was clearly marked.

In the sphere of their home lives the women were in a very different situation from the men. The strategies employed by the women in the sphere of the home to improve their situation indicates that they tried to achieve a balance between change and the preservation of marital and family harmony. In its objective conditions the political work was by and large equally burdensome for women and men. The differences that did exist concerned rather the subjective apprehension of the state of affairs. The women valued a less conflict-orientated environment, with room for dialogue and objectivity in the debate. The women in Örebro's local politics regarded themselves as having an influence on municipal policy - and they did in fact have such an influence. Though in part on the basis of different notions and with different areas of concern, most of them represented women's interests. Finally it is stated in the dissertation that the fact that women had a comparatively large role in Örebro's local politics did not automatically mean that they had authority as women. Owing to the rapid development which has occurred in Swedish municipalities during the 90s in the form of market-orientation it remains an open question whether women's political influence has improved or suffered a backlash.

Key words: women in local politics, women's interests, women's culture, identification as woman, women's strategies.