

Discussion papers

DP/129/2001

Decent Work
Research
Programme

**On the edge of corporatism:
The role of the Swedish women's
associations in promoting
Decent Work**

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ISBN 92-9014-643-5

First published 2001

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Requests for this publication should be sent to: IILS Publications, International Institute for Labour Studies, P.O. Box 6, CH-1211 Geneva 22 (Switzerland).

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1. *Introduction*

This interim paper aims to provide a preliminary review regarding the role of women's associations in promoting decent work in Sweden, based on the review of existing literature on this issue. In the "decent work" report presented to the International Labour Conference in 1999, the Director-General of the ILO clearly laid out the fundamental goal towards which all ILO activities should be directed in the future, namely the promotion of "opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity". The report singled out four strategic areas in which the ILO needs to operate to reach the goal of decent work: the promotion of fundamental rights at work, the creation of greater employment and income opportunities, the provision of social protection, and the promotion of social dialogue (ILO, 1999, p. 3).

Under this new initiative, it is now being integrated into ILO's policy concern whether civil society organizations other than trade unions and employer associations have a role to play as a complementing or facilitating actor in designing and implementing decent work policies. As gender perspectives form one of the central aspects of the decent work paradigm, the potential roles of women's associations in promoting decent work constitute an important part of the ILO's new interest in civil society organizations.

From this perspective, Sweden provides an interesting case. First, with regard to the ILO's four fundamental areas of decent work, Swedish women, together with their Nordic counterparts, enjoy the most favourable conditions in the world: almost equal access to work, a very small gender gap in wages, a prominent level of social protection, and a unionization rate higher than that of men.¹ These admirable achievements suggest that Sweden is a good case for the investigation of the relationship between the level of gender equality in the labour market and the role of women's associations. Second, Sweden has a tradition of well-established social dialogue, which is often called (neo) corporatism.² This social dialogue has been an essential part of the policy process, in which trade unions and employer associations have participated both in designing and implementing public policies. Therefore, Sweden is also a good case for examining what roles civil society organizations can play in the country where the consensus of traditional social partners have had strong influence on public policy-making.

Most previous researches emphasize that Swedish corporatism has contributed greatly to achieving the present level of gender equality in Sweden. It has been argued that gender equality has been regarded as a component of the larger cause for class equality of labour movements. It is also noted that the political alliance between the strong labour movements and the hegemonic Social Democratic Party brought about a "women-friendly welfare state" (Hernes, 1987; see also Ruggie, 1984; Bergqvist and Findlay, 1999; Huber and Stephens, 2000). Then, has Swedish corporatism been inclusive enough to integrate women's aspirations for gender equality into its institutional system, thereby marginalizing the role of women's independent organizations? If so, what internal mechanism of the corporatist system has made it possible? If not, how have Swedish women organized themselves to represent their interests? What has been the specific role of these women's organizations in promoting decent work for women? Finally, what are the implications

¹ See the next section.

² The definition of neo-corporatism varies depending on scholars. Schmitter (1974) regarded corporatism as a mode of interest representation of organized groups (in contrast to pluralism and syndicalism), while Lehmbruch (1974) considered it as a type of policy-making among organized interests and the state. Paul and Winkler (1974) defined it as a kind of economic system such as capitalism, socialism and syndicalism. Although academics have never reached an agreement on the definition of neo-corporatism, Sweden has been usually regarded as an example of strong neo-corporatism in most previous researches (Schmitter, 1981, 294; Lehmbruch, 1985, 13; Nollert, 1995, 142-3). The term, corporatism used in this paper is closest to the Lehmbruch's definition.

that the Swedish experience suggests for the relationship between women's organizations and corporatism?

As a tentative conclusion, based on the rather limited information available in the existing literature, this paper will argue that while the corporatist system has been the main contributor to achieving the high level of gender equality in Sweden, independent women's associations have also played a unique role as a "fertilizer" of women-friendly reforms on the edge of the corporatist system. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 summarizes women's status in the labour market to clarify the problems as well as the achievements of the women-friendly welfare state in Sweden. Section 3 explores what role the key institutional components of Swedish corporatism have played in promoting decent work for women. The discussion includes their roles in promoting gender parity in the political representation, since this has been critical to development of women-friendly public policies in corporatist Sweden. Section 4 examines why and how Swedish women have organized themselves beyond the corporatist structure and what has been their unique role in promoting gender equality in the labour market and the political arena. Section 5 concludes with a brief discussion of the reasons for the weakness and invisibility of women's associations, particularly in relation to the Swedish corporatist system.

2. Women and work in the Swedish model

2.1 Upside

Sweden still has one of the most integrated labour markets for women in the world. Female employment rate declined along with the lasting economic recession in the nineties standing at 70.9 per cent in 1999. However, it was still well above the average OECD level of 55.4 per cent, and only slightly lower than the 73.8 per cent in Norway (table 1). Sweden also has a small gender difference in the employment rate. It decreased from 4.2 per cent in 1990 to 3.9 per cent in 1999. The female unemployment rate was lower than the one for men in 1999 (table 1), suggesting that recession has not disadvantaged women in terms of employment opportunities (Ellingsaeter, 2000, p. 356). A large public sector is one of the most important factors that have contributed to such a high female employment rate in Sweden. Public sector employment increased dramatically by an average of four percentage points per decade between 1960 and 1989. Most of these new jobs were picked up by married women, largely as a result of the growth in part-time work (Curtin, 1999, p. 136). In 1992, the women's employment share of the public sector was 60.1 per cent against 39.9 per cent of the private sector (table 2, Gornick, 1998, p. 698).

Wage or earning-differentials between the sexes are relatively small in Sweden. Table 3 shows that the earning ratio of Swedish women is ranked in the highest group of a cross-national comparison: in 1992, Swedish women earned 74 per cent of male earnings. As far as wages are concerned, Swedish women earned 90 per cent of their male counterparts in the private sector, and 84 per cent of those in the government sector (*Statistics Sweden, 1995*, p. 56 quoted from Curtin, 1999, p. 131). Swedish women workers are highly unionised in both blue- and white-collar jobs. As female participation in the labour force has increased since 1945, female union membership has also increased substantially in two major union confederations, the LO (Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions) and the TCO (Central Organization of Salaried Workers). Figure 1 shows that as of 1995 Swedish women were more unionized than men: 87.1 per cent of women in the blue-collar sector and 86.3 per cent in the white-collar sector, as against male rates of 84.0 per cent and 79.8 per cent respectively (Curtin and Higgins, 1998).

Such a high level of gender equality in the labour market was achieved with the support of comprehensive public policies. The reforms in the social and labour market policies in the sixties and seventies became a cornerstone for the development of the women-friendly welfare state. By

the mid-sixties, the requirement of better accommodating female workers in a tight labour market served to highlight and politicize the obstacles that discouraged married women from entering paid work. It also provided a political space for the “sex-role debate”, and “the second wave of feminism”. The sex-role debate resulted in a social consensus on a new sex-role model, which Sainsbury named later the “universal bread-winner model” against the “male bread-winner model”. In this new gender model, both women and men are independent individuals who share the same duties and rights in relation to family and to the labour market (Sainsbury, 1996; Curtin, 1999, p. 123).

Reflecting this new social consensus, the Social Democratic government initiated a number of programmes dedicated to promoting women’s right to work. The government extended daycare facilities greatly. Maternity leave was replaced with parental leave. Joint taxation was abolished and individual taxation was introduced. The government also extended active labour market policies to include women in the early 1970s. Based on these reforms, improvement has been continuously made, allowing Swedish women to combine gainful employment and family responsibility better.

Today, Swedish women, together with their Nordic counterparts, are regarded as enjoying the most favourable conditions in the world, especially in the area of social protection. Parental leave is more generous in many aspects in Sweden than in any other country: paid parental leave is guaranteed for up to 52 weeks with 90 per cent of wage compensation and can be extended for an extra 26 weeks with reduced compensation (table 4; Mayes, et al. 1999, pp. 124-6). In terms of sharing family responsibilities between men and women, the most progressive aspect of Swedish parental leave is probably compulsory sharing. In 1992, the government introduced the “Father’s month,” by which 30 days were earmarked for the second parent, usually the father (Bergqvist and Jungar, 2000, pp. 170-171). As far as public childcare is concerned, Sweden no longer holds the supreme position. Yet, Sweden remains relatively highly ranked in a cross-national comparison. In the late 1980s, Sweden had introduced the legislation that established childcare as a right for all children under the age of six. By that time, 32 per cent of children under age three, and 79 per cent of children from age of three to five were enrolled in public childcare programmes (table 5; Mayes et al., 1999, pp. 126-8).

Swedish women are also relatively well protected in the labour market. Sex discrimination is banned in hiring, pay, choice of assignment, termination of work contract, etc. The Equal Opportunity Act of 1992 states that employers must promote a well-balanced sex distribution in various types of jobs, and also counteract the pay-differential between men and women performing equal value work. In addition, there are virtually no gender differences in the proportion of the unemployed who receive unemployment compensation: constituting about 67 per cent for women and 69 per cent for men. Women also constitute approximately 46 per cent of the participants in labour market programs (Ellingsaeter, 2000, pp. 350-5).

2.2 Downside

The most frequently indicated disadvantage of women’s work in Sweden is occupational segregation by sex.³ The level of gender-based occupational segregation is substantially higher in Sweden than in other OECD countries (Melkers and Anker, 1998, pp. 41-43), mainly due to the

³ Gender-based occupational segregation is defined as “the tendency for men and women to be employed in different occupations across the entire occupational structure (horizontal segregation), and the tendency for women and men to be employed in different positions within the same occupation or occupational group (vertical segregation)” (Melkas and Anker, 1998, p. 5). Though only the former is dealt with here, the latter is also an important factor contributing to gender inequality in the labour market. According to Melkas and Anker (1998, p. 88), the gap in the feminization of relatively lower as compared to higher status occupations was about 47 per cent on average in Sweden in 1990.

feminization of both monetized household-type jobs⁴ and a large public sector. In 1990, the size of monetized household-type occupations in Sweden was bigger (14 per cent of the whole non-agricultural occupations) than in other Nordic countries (12 per cent) let alone the non-Nordic OECD countries (4 per cent). The degree to which these occupations were feminised also the highest in Sweden: whereas some 10 per cent of the female non-agricultural labour force was in this category of jobs in non-Nordic OECD countries and 27 per cent in Nordic countries on average, the figure in Sweden stood at 33 per cent (Melkers and Anker, 1998, pp. 61-74; figure 2).

Since the large public sector undertakes much of these monetized household-type jobs, public sector occupations are also highly feminized as in Sweden. In 1992, 60.1 per cent of women employees were in the public sector. In comparison, only 20.8 per cent of women in the US and 19.4 per cent in the UK were employed in the public sector (table 2). Sweden shows a significantly higher percentage even when compared to other Nordic countries: 44 per cent in Norway and 46 per cent in Finland in 1992, respectively (Melkers and Anker, 1998, p. 14).

Disproportionate employment in part-time work is another negative aspect of women's work in Sweden. In 1999, 22.3 per cent of female workers were involved in part-time work against 7.3 per cent of male workers.⁵ The female share of total part-time workers was 73.7 per cent (table 1). It is also reported that 28.6 per cent of female part-time employment was "involuntary" in the sense that these part-timers took their current jobs simply because they could not find a full-time job (Eurostat, 2000, p. 135). Women were more likely to take on part-time jobs than men in order to accommodate family responsibilities (Melkers and Anker, 1998). The incidence of temporary work is also higher among women than men. In 1999, 16.6 per cent of women employees were involved in temporary work against 11.2 per cent of male employees (Eurostat, 2000, p. 111).

In Sweden, occupational segregation by gender, high feminization of the public sector, and high incidence of part-time work among female workers are closely connected, all of which contributes to lowering women's earnings. A considerable portion of Swedish women works in monetized household-type of occupations, and a significant percentage of these occupations belongs to the public sector where pay level tends to be relatively low.⁶ Part-time work, often performed by women workers in the public sector, not only exacerbates occupational segregation but also earning-differentials between men and women (table 3).

Despite all these shortcomings, Swedish women still hold a more favourable position in the labour market than their counterparts in other countries. To some extent, gender segregation and high incidence of part-time work among women might be the other side of the coin: in fact, the remarkable growth of female employment was achieved notably by the creation of part-time employment in the public sector. In addition, it is noteworthy that (women-dominated) part-time and atypical work do not necessarily mean 'precarious' work in Sweden, as Mahon (1996) pointed out. They have been relatively well protected by collective bargaining as well as by law and practice.⁷

⁴According to Melkas and Anker's definition, "monetized household-type jobs" mean paid jobs that traditionally have belonged to unpaid household work. With a few exceptions (e. g. gardening and home repairs), most jobs in this category are related to work of a housewife, such as care of children and elderly/ill people, house cleaning, cooking, and laundry. For more details, see Melkas and Anker (1998, 63).

⁵ Here, part-time workers refer to persons who usually work less than 30 hours per week in their main job. If the definition is based on a spontaneous response by the declarant, 40 per cent of female worker were involved in part-time work against 9.4 per cent of male workers in 1999 (Eurostat, 2000, 125).

⁶ According to Gornick and Jacobs (1998), once compositional difference (e.g. education) is controlled, both women and men in public sector in Sweden receive pay penalty (not pay advantage). Furthermore, female/male earning ratios in the public sector tend to be significantly higher than those in the private sector in other countries, but, there is no difference in Sweden.

⁷ Most Swedish part-time workers work three quarters of the 'normal' working hours. No more than 16 per cent of part-timers work less than 20 hours a week — a threshold below which access to social insurance benefits begins to be adversely affected. Moreover, 80 per cent of part-time workers are unionized.

3. The role of the Swedish corporatism in providing Decent Work for women

As seen above, Swedish women have enjoyed an extraordinary level of gender equality in the labour market, though there are some downside. Then, what roles have institutional components of the Swedish corporatist system played in making these remarkable achievements? What were the limitations and problems in their roles, and how have women inside the corporatist system responded to them? Let us start by examining the role of trade unions, one of the key components of Swedish corporatism.

3.1 Women in trade unions

Traditionally, Swedish women have considered the labour movement as an ally in their efforts to further the interest of working women (Curtin, 1999, p. 118). Labour movements in Sweden have regarded gender equality as an important component of their major cause of class equality. In addition, the increasing number of women members since 1945 has induced trade unions to recognize the need to better represent the interests of women workers. Moreover, in response to the expected shortages of labour in the early 1960s, the LO realized that this shortage had to be met not by increasing immigration, but by drawing Swedish women into the labour force in order to maintain the unity of the labour movements. This may explain why the LO played an important role in political affiliation with the Social Democratic Party (SAP) in the sex-role debate and resulting reforms in the 1960s.

In the early sixties, the LO and the Swedish Employers' Organization (SAF) agreed on the abolition of a separate wage for women. In addition, LO's Rhen-Meidner policy of wage solidarity contributed significantly to narrowing the gender gap in wages.⁸ Though this policy itself was gender-neutral, it disproportionately benefitted women, as they constituted a substantial share of the low-wage earners. The LO also became an important political supporter of the shift from "the male bread-winner model" to "the universal bread-winner model". The LO was one of the main advocates for the turning of maternity leave into parental leave. The 1969 report of the joint LO-SAP Equality Commission endorsed the replacement of maternity with parental insurance. In 1974, the Social Democratic government finally introduced the parental leave legislation based on the principle of income-related replacement.⁹ A marked expansion in day-care facilities supported by government subsidy policies was also achieved between 1960 and 1970 under the pressure of the LO as well as women activists in the SAP (Mahon, 1998, pp. 16-17).

Despite such contributions, the role of trade unions in promoting gender equality was not uncontroversial. Many feminist scholars indicated that union policies had been generally gender-neutral and sometimes even indifferent to women's problems and needs, especially before the late 1980s. First of all, it was pointed out that women had been highly under-represented in the

Temporary workers also enjoy the benefits of union membership, although at a lower rate (57 per cent) than 'regular' workers (Mahon, 1996, pp. 555-6). In addition, the OECD's ranking on strictness of employment protection legislation shows that Sweden has had the most rigorous regulations among Scandinavian countries (e.g. regarding dismissal and temporary lay-off). Concerning the regulation of temporary and part-time work Sweden also belongs to the strictest group, though the degree of strictness has decreased slightly since the late 1980s (Ellingsaeter, 2000, pp. 353-5).

⁸ TCO adopted a different policy. Equal pay has been pursued through job evaluation based on individual performance and technical requirements of the job (Curtin, 1999, p. 133).

⁹ This principle was intended to induce fathers, who were generally paid higher than mothers, to take their share of the entitled leave (Mahon, 1999, p. 244).

decision-making process in trade unions. Table 6 shows this clearly. Women's representation ratio had been far lower, compared with their membership rates, in both major union confederations, the LO and the TCO. Furthermore, the more important the decision-making body in unions, the fewer women were represented: fewer women were on the executive board of practical importance than in the congress and the general assembly (Bergqvist, 1991).¹⁰ While the under-representation of women was considered a problem, trade unions were resisting the introduction of sex-proportional quotas. Neither the LO nor the TCO provided a special programme to improve female representation until the 1990s, since they regarded any gender-specific approach that gave priority to women as 'undemocratic.'¹¹

Trade unions' gender-neutral position is also found in that the LO opposed the introduction of the Equal Opportunity Act, a special law against sexual discrimination, which was proposed by the non-socialist government in 1979. The LO, along with the Social Democrats, saw the new legislation as an attempt by the more conservative government to replace the class issues with the gender issues (Bergqvist and Findlay, 1999, p. 129). In addition, given the LO's principle that all labour-related questions should be negotiated rather than legislated, the Act was seen as trespassing on this principle. The policy outcome was a 'compromise' as it usually happens in Swedish politics. According to the original proposal, an equal opportunity ombudsman supported by the Equal Opportunity Commission was to be appointed to force employers to take active measures in compliance with the Act. But the Act that was finally adopted in 1980 preserved the priority of collective agreements between trade unions and employers, and the activities of the ombudsman were confined to represent the few workers not covered by collective agreements (Curtin, 1999, p. 126; Curtin and Higgins, 1998, p. 79).

In the case of women's separate organizing, the LO was clearly against it. It outlawed any women's separate caucusing as divisive factionalism until fairly recently. There were three principles inimical to women's autonomous and separate organizing in the LO: (1) class comes before sex; (2) LO is by itself the most effective vehicle for women's aspirations towards gender equality; (3) women members in LO have more interests in common with male members than with other women's group (Curtin and Higgins, 1998, p. 79). In addition, a women's committee did not exist in the union, and the family councils usually dealt with women issues. In short, the LO had regarded women's independent organizing as sectarian, thus harmful to the labour movement as a whole. This attitude, which was shaped in response to the middle-class composition of the early feminist movements (Qvist et al., 1984, p. 263, quoted from Mahon, 1996, p. 558; Briskin, 1999a, pp. 18-22), had continued until the late 1980s. The LO did not want an outside organization to attract its female members away and to undermine its consensus-seeking ideology. To summarize, the LO played a great role in building a women-friendly welfare state. Yet, before the late 1980s, its policies were largely characterized by gender-neutrality, which focused not on women's issues, women's rights, or discrimination against women, but on the family and the labour market (Briskin, 1999a, p. 18).

However, such reluctance by the LO to address "women-specific" issues began to change in the late eighties in ways that provided new opportunities for women wage earners (Mahon, 1996; Higgins, 1996, pp. 175-6; Briskin, 1999b, p. 168).¹² The employers' drive to decentralize collective bargaining and to increase flexibility during the 1980s made Swedish unions find themselves in a

¹⁰ Women in TCO, in which female members were the majority, were represented better than in the LO. However, the share of women in decision-making bodies has not improved much for a long time, and has even declined in the executive board (Bergqvist, 1991).

¹¹ In 1981, the government recommended that one woman and one man should be proposed for each position in the national boards and agencies. However, unions have strongly opposed any involvement by the government in this matter (Bergqvist, 1991, pp. 120-1, Curtin, 1999, p. 126).

¹² The following discussion on LO's new gender policies since the late 1980s benefited much from Mahon (1996; 1998).

deepening crisis. As it became clear in the early 1990s that the crisis could no longer be ignored, the LO launched a new strategy called “solidaristic work,” to regain its position in the rapidly changing society. Solidaristic work aimed to seize the opportunity for ‘rewarding work’ opened up by managerial interests in flexible arrangements, but, the LO, unlike the employers, wanted to extend the opportunity to all workers. By asserting the pivotal role of (local) unions in negotiating the terms of the new production relations —job classification, associated wage systems, training opportunities, staffing levels and working time— this strategy also aimed to secure the conditions for the formation of a workplace “collectivity” rather than the atomized “co-workers”. Solidaristic work, however, entailed more than just a shift in the union strategy of bargaining. It also involved the adoption of a new organizational paradigm. Above all, it was necessary to develop a new style of leadership that could motivate the members to participate in a dialogue between the leaders and the rank and files rather than tell them what to do, as solidaristic work could not be achieved without support from the grass-roots. Building cross-collar collaboration at the workplace also became an important task as well, because otherwise some employers would have evoked “competition” between blue and white-collar workers at the enterprise level (Mahon, 1996, p. 567).

It was in this context that the LO recognized the potential of the resurgent women’s movements to advance its cause. Since women tended to have worse jobs, less access to training opportunities and, consequently, lower wages, they were regarded as those who gained the most from solidaristic work, and were thus most likely to be its supporters. In addition, women’s ‘way of working’ —more inclined to an active-dialogue leadership style and team work, keen to maintain the balance between official union roles and work on the shop floor, and focused on local connection and grass-roots activism— started to be seen as particularly compatible with the new organizational paradigm. Finally, at its 1991 congress, the LO came to state clearly the virtuous link between solidaristic work and equal opportunity (Mahon, 1996, pp. 568-570).

In this context, LO women ran a concerted campaign to bring women and gender issues into the heart of the confederation. In 1987, LO women activists published “Women in the Union,” which laid out a long-term strategy for appointing more women into union positions. They also organized LO’s first real conference by and for women in 1988, which helped broaden the women’s network not only inside but outside the LO. In addition, LO women pushed the leadership to undertake a considerable research on gender questions. One of the important results of these efforts was *Class and Sex* (1991), a background document concerning the exclusion of women from the union hierarchy. The title of the document represented a symbolic abandonment of the traditional principle that class comes before sex (Mahon, 1996, pp. 559-560; Curtin, 1999, p. 129).

This new women’s initiative in the LO brought considerable progress. First, several measures were taken to increase female representation in trade unions. At the 1991 congress, the LO statutes were amended to include the goal of gender equality in union positions. When, despite this effort, no significant progress had been achieved by the mid nineties, the LO executive committee adopted new working principles: all new vacant positions within the confederation should be filled by women unless a special case could be made for the employment of a man; when research committees were set up, 50 per cent of the participants would be women (Curtin, 1999, pp. 127-130, Higgins, 1996). Second, pay equity became an official goal of the LO. Although the gender gap in wages had been substantially smaller in Sweden than in other OECD countries, wages had tended to be low in social service jobs in the public sector where women were working at a disproportionately higher rate.¹³ Therefore, some women-majority unions pushed the LO to

¹³ Such low wages in the social service jobs can be attributable to the under-evaluation of care-giving works. The wage equality policies of the government had not been helpful to these workers, because they hardly had male counterparts in the ‘same job’ for comparison. This problem was strongly addressed by the Kommunal (The Swedish Municipal Workers’ Union), the biggest union in the LO and in Sweden, in which 81 per cent of 600,000 members were women (Higgins, 1996).

negotiate for the first time a special one per cent supplement to women's wages, and the LO finally accepted it in 1993. Though its implementation did not materialize as LO unions failed to reach an agreement on a common bargaining stance in the 1995 wage round, this signaled a significant change in LO's pay equity policy. Finally, the hostile attitude towards separate organizing of women was also changed. In line with the solidaristic work strategy, the LO encouraged and supported women's organizing inside the confederation as well as an informal cross-collar network of women at the workplace (see the next section).

All of these imply that the LO abandoned its previous gender-neutral approach and began to shift to a gender-specific approach. Feminist analysts of the union movements now concede that the LO relationship to its female constituency appears to be shifting fundamentally, in terms of its policy orientation as well as its gender representation (Curtin and Higgins, 1998, p. 86)

3.2 Women in political parties

Unlike the controversial position of trade unions, political parties are regarded as having played a major role in achieving the present level of gender equality in Sweden. The elected women parliamentarians and women's federations within political parties have been central agents and vehicles that took up women's concerns (Briskin, 1999a, p. 11).

In Sweden, the women's constituency organization is primarily found inside political parties. Women's federations were established during the 1920s and 1930s in all major parties, and today, most of them (except the Left Party and the Moderate Party) have large women's associations.¹⁴ They have not been mere auxiliaries in the party system but a 'power base' for women.¹⁵ Above all, the women's federations in major parties have been very active at the initial stage of selecting potential candidates for elections and pushed the selection committees to place more women on the list. Under this pressure, the political parties became clearly more disposed to nominate women than were the trade unions (Eduards, 1991, p. 175; Maillé and Wängnerude, 1999). Consequently, the women members of parliament (MPs) in Sweden rose rapidly particularly from the seventies, reaching 43 per cent in 1998 (table 7). Today 40-50 percent of the elected representatives at local, regional, and central level are women. While only one woman served as a member of the cabinet in 1965, an equal number of women and men were represented in the cabinet in 1994.

As some research shows (Karvonen and Selle, 1995; Oskarson and Wängnerud, 1995; 1996), there has been a clear linkage between women in the parliament and women citizen-voters in terms of policy priorities and positions (quoted from Maillé and Wängnerude 1999, p. 202). Therefore, an increasing number of women MPs, who enjoyed wide support from the women's federations in the political parties, made it possible to deliver ordinary women's concerns to political decision-making bodies. This brought about substantial changes in policy outcomes, which contributed greatly to promoting gender equality at work for Swedish women. For example, a series of reforms in the sixties and the early seventies, such as the introduction of the parental leave and the vast extension of public daycare facilities, became feasible only with the active initiative of women MPs in the Social Democratic and the Liberal Party. With the strong support of their women's federations, they managed to win over their opponents in both political parties and finally passed these policy proposals in the parliament (Mahon, 1999, p. 242). Women MPs and women's federations also tried to further these reforms. In 1974, the Social Democratic Women in Sweden

¹⁴ In the 1970s, the women's federation in the Social Democratic, Centre, and Moderate Parties had 50,000 to 70,000 members each. Today, these organizations are shrinking, while the number of women in the parliament is rising (Maillé and Wängnerude, 1999, p. 197). It seems to reflect the general trend that less people—men as well as women—want to participate political party activities.

¹⁵ In a cross-national perspective, these organizations in Sweden appear to have more political clout than their counterparts in other countries (Sainsbury, 1993, quoted from Maillé and Wängnerude, 1999, p. 196).

(SKKF), the women's federation in the SAP, put forward two proposals: the introduction of quotas to ensure that parental leave was shared by both parents, and the adoption of a six-hour work day.¹⁶ Although these proposals did not materialize immediately, they continued to remain on the party agenda, often triggering hot political debates among the party and its affiliates. The introduction of quotas in parental leave was finally achieved in the form of "Father's month" in 1991.¹⁷ The six-hour day is one of the important agenda items for the SAP and the LO, and is still being discussed.

Certainly, the hegemonic SAP that has held office since 1932, except for the 1976-1982 and 1991-1994 periods, has been the most important channel through which women could access the political decision-making process. However, other non-socialist parties also provided favourable conditions in which women could represent their interest in the political arena.¹⁸ For example, the Liberal Party, which had been the largest non-socialist party until the late 1960s, and then became a small party with heterogeneous electorates, was a driving force in politicizing gender issues in Sweden (Eduards, 1991, p. 175; see also Sainsbury, 1999, p. 97). In the 1960s, the Liberal Party provided political room for young female Liberals to raise new demands for women's liberation, which gave rise to the "sex-role debate". The Liberal Party also supported most of the gender equality reforms initiated by the SAP in the sixties.¹⁹ The competition for women voters between the Social Democrats and the Liberals continued favouring women in the following decades. When the Liberal Party formed a coalition government together with the Centre and Conservative Party in 1979, for the second time in the post-war period, it won over its coalition partners and managed to legislate the Equal Opportunity Act.

The late eighties and nineties provided new opportunities for women in the political arena, as was also the case for trade unions. In the 1985 election, it turned out for the first time that women were more likely to support the SAP than men: 46 per cent of women voted for the SAP against 41 per cent of men. This made the SAP recognize once again the political potential that women presented. In addition, competition among parties became fiercer, as discontent among the

¹⁶ While both proposals pointed to a shift to the dual breadwinner family model based on equal partnership, the goal of the latter was more far reaching. While the former aimed at preventing the care burden from falling only on mothers, the latter implied a claim for fundamental changes in working life. If the six-hour day were to be a norm for *both* men and women, hence part-time as a "standard," a "one and three-quarters" family (full-time worker husband and part-timer wife) could be changed to a family of two equal breadwinners. For the long debates on the six-hour day in the SAP and the LO, see Mahon (1995, 1998).

¹⁷ The introduction of quotas in parental leave was legislated not by the SAP, but by the non-socialist government in 1991. In 1976, a bold action, which Karlsson named later a "coup," by a small group of women MPs in the SAP secured the party's official commitment to introduce a "Father's month" in parental leave, but it did not materialize as the SAP lost the 1976 election (Karlsson, 1998, pp. 54-62; Mahon, 1998, p. 18).

¹⁸ Such a favourable position of women in political parties is primarily related to the composition of the political party system and increased competition among parties particularly since the 1960s. Swedish party politics, between 1921 and 1988, were dominated by the five-party system, which can be categorized as two different blocs: the socialist bloc (the Communist party and the Social Democratic Party) and the non-socialist bloc (the agrarian Farmers' Union, the Liberal Party, and the Conservative party). In the 1930s and the 1950s, the Social Democrats stayed in office in alliance with the Farmers' Union, but this 'red-green alliance' collapsed mainly due to the pension reform in 1959 (for more details on the pension reform in 1959 and its impacts on the electoral base of political parties, see Esping-Andersen, 1985, pp. 160-161 and Baldwin 1990, pp. 21-23). The political market became more fluid as the growing new middle class and new social movements emerged on the political scene in the sixties. The Farmers' Union was quick not only to change its name (the Centre Party) but also to modernize its policy profile by raising new issues such as nuclear energy and environment, which were becoming important concerns of the growing new middle class. In contrast, the SAP and the Liberal Party began to compete for the support of women voters who were emerging as a new force in the political market as well as in the labour market (Bergstrom, 1991; Mahon, 1998).

¹⁹ With the support of the Liberals, the minority Social Democratic government succeeded in introducing the parental leave legislation in 1974.

traditional supporters of the SAP deepened due to its neo-liberal policies in the late eighties, and as new parties emerged in the parliament in 1991 (Mahon, 1998, p. 17). Gender became a very sensitive issue in competition among political parties, particularly in the wake of “the third feminist wave” triggered by the crisis of the welfare state (see Section 4).

In this context, some progress in gender issues was made not only by the SAP government but also by the non-socialist government. After the 1985 election, the SAP government appointed several feminists in key cabinet positions. More importantly, it set up the Commission of Inquiry on Women’s Representation, whose activities had broad impact on the gender parity of representation in public life since the late eighties (see Section 3.3). In the 1991 election that the SAP lost, women’s representation fell in the parliament for the first time. It was considered a red alert to women, as women politicians in political parties had served as central agents for transmitting ordinary women’s concerns into the political arena. However, this misfortune finally turned into a blessing: in response to the threat of a women’s network to create a women’s party (see Section 4), most of the established major parties put up more women in the 1994 election, which resulted in a sharp increase in female members of the parliament (from 34 to 41 per cent). When the SAP took power again in 1994, it naturally became more responsive to women’s issues. When the government was engaged in reducing social expenditure, it was made clear that the focus should be on transfer payments, not on social services that might affect both women’s jobs and care burdens.²⁰ In 1998, the prime minister Persson announced that the Ministers of Social Policy and Labour were working with the County and Municipal Associations to improve working conditions in the public sector, with particular attention to working time (i.e. the reduction of involuntary part-time work and of the just-in-time pool of replacement workers in the social service sector) (Mahon, 1998, pp. 20-21). The non-socialist government in office between 1991 and 1994 also made some progress under the Liberals’ initiative: the introduction of the “Father’s month” in parental leave, and the revision of the Equal Opportunity Act.²¹

To sum up, political parties in Sweden have played a major role in achieving the present level of gender equality. Undoubtedly, women politicians in political parties were sometimes forced to concede and compromise, giving up acting “as women” (Karlsson, 1998). There have also been pressures on women in political parties to go along with party loyalties. Cross-party alliances have not been very successful as party leaderships were reluctant to accept women’s cooperation beyond their own parties. However, overall conditions for women in political parties have been far more favourable than in other institutions. Political parties not only allowed strong women’s federations within the parties to be built, but were also pioneers in promoting gender parity in political representation. They also provided women politician with channels to convey ordinary women’s concerns to political decision-making bodies, through which they promoted women-friendly public policies.

3.3 Women in the policy-making bodies of the corporatist system: Inquiry commissions and lay boards

The last institutional component of Swedish corporatism examined in this paper is the corporatist policy-making bodies of the state. Swedish politics have been organized primarily on the basis of

²⁰ In fact, in the spring budget of 1997, the government promised an extra four billion kronor transfer to municipalities and counties in order to improve the quality of social services. An additional eight billion was also promised in each of the subsequent three years (Mahon, 1998, pp. 21-2).

²¹ Under the new act, collective agreements cannot displace its provisions, and all employers of ten or more employees must draw up an equality plan each year, which contains an outline of the measures the employer intends to facilitate the combination of employment and parenthood, to overcome sex segregation and to eliminate discrimination with respect to promotion, training, and pay (Curtin 1999, p. 127).

class, and dominated by the centralized and influential organizations of workers and employers. There has been a strong link between the powerful labour movement and the hegemonic SAP. In this political environment, economic and social policies have been developed through tripartite negotiations. Labour market organizations have participated both in preparing and implementing these policies (Michelletti, 1991; Rothstein, 1998; Briskin, 1999a).

In this corporatist policy-making system, there have been two types of state institutions, which are of vital importance for policy process: *inquiry commissions* that prepare government proposals concerning different policy areas; and *lay boards* that implement government policies. In these commissions and boards, representatives from the trade unions and employer associations have worked with elected members of parliament and state administrators, and consensus among them usually turned into public policies. Therefore, Swedish administration has been unusually independent of the respective ministries compared to other Western democracies (Rothstein, 1988, quoted from Bergqvist, 1991, p. 110). Have women, then, been well represented in these public bodies?

Until the mid eighties, the gender pattern of representation in these public bodies had been more similar to that of unions than to that of political parties. The female share was around 15 to 20 per cent in these public bodies (table 8), though the figure varied across the policy areas and the institutions that delegates represented.²² Such gender disparity in powerful corporatist decision-making bodies was criticized by some feminist scholars as symbolic evidence that women were marginalised in the policy process. For example, Hernes (1987) noted that women in Scandinavian countries, including Sweden, exercised little influence on the corporatist system of representation, so that they were 'policy takers' rather than 'policy makers' of the tutelary state.

However, this gendered pattern of representation in these two kinds of public bodies began to change rather rapidly in the late 1980s. Among others, the role of the Commission of Inquiry on Women's Representation was remarkable. As mentioned earlier, this Commission was set up right after the 1985 election, in which more women voted for the SAP than men for the first time. The establishment of the Commission implicitly reflected the government's concerns about the slow progress in the equal representation between two sexes in the policy-making system, more specifically in commissions and boards. The final report of the Commission, *Every Other Seat for a Woman* (1987), pointed out that the serious gender imbalance in the composition of commission and board members. It proposed a long-term project, which aimed at an increase in female share in these bodies to 30 per cent by 1990, 40 per cent by 1995, and 50 per cent by 1998 (Bergqvist and Findlay, 1999, p. 134).

Since the publication of the *Every Other Seat for a Woman*, female representation has increased greatly, especially in lay boards. In lay boards, the female ratio increased from 18 per cent in 1986 to 29 per cent in 1989, and reached the first goal of 30 per cent in 1990. Women accounted for 36 per cent of the board members in 1992, and 43 per cent in 1997 (table 8, see also Bergqvist, 1995, pp. 210-224; Bergqvist and Findlay, 1999, p. 134). In inquiry commissions, the female share increased from 18 per cent in 1986 to 24 per cent in 1989. By 1992, women comprised 28 per cent of commissions (table 8). Although these figures did not reach the target proposed by the

²² The female representation of these public bodies were rather different across the institutions that delegates represented. For example, in the commissions, the group of representatives from political parties had the highest female participation rate at 28 per cent in 1986, whereas 20 per cent of the representatives from trade unions were women. The third big group was representatives from administrative ministries, of whom 18 per cent were women. Such different representative patterns of women seem to reflect the representation of women in their own organizations, as Bergqvist (1991) noted. She argued that the already male-dominated structure of internal decision-making bodies of some institutions did not give much chance to women to be represented in the external decision-making bodies. The highest rate of female participation from political parties suggests that political parties have been the most important channels for women to participate in the corporatist decision-making process.

Commission, they can still be seen as a considerable progress. In addition, the impact was far more reaching than these figures may imply. According to Mahon (1996, pp. 558-9), the publication of the Commission report sparked the rebirth of the Swedish women's movement, shifting the public discourse on gender equality towards a more open discussion about the power relations between women and men. The publication of "Women in the Union," which became a new starting point to raise the issue of gender parity within the LO, was the first response of union women to the challenge posed in *Every Other Seat for a Woman*.

It needs to be emphasized that this impressive progress was a product of successful collaboration among women in various institutions. Much of the government support for the Commission came from the pressure of women politicians in the cabinet and the SAP.²³ The contributions of women in other institutions were also significant in this progress. The Commission project mobilized a wide range of women's organizations and networks so that unions, political parties, and workplaces were involved in its implementing at the local and central level (Bergqvist and Findlay, 1999, pp. 135-6). Women from all parties were in complete agreement with the goal of gender parity in corporatist decision making bodies, and their concerted efforts finally paid off.

The area of female policy specialization is another important issue regarding women's representation in the corporatist decision-making bodies. It is often pointed out that women in these bodies have tended to be more represented in the areas of family, social, and education policies. In fact, as table 8 shows, women in these bodies have been disproportionately represented in the category of "social welfare" (Bergqvist 1995, p. 213). Such policy specialization of women has often been viewed as a factor allocating women to less powerful positions compared to men. However, as Sainsbury (1988, pp. 344-5) suggests, such interpretation is not well grounded in the case of Sweden, where more than 30 per cent of GDP is spent in these policy areas. In Sweden, these policies are of essential importance to the well-being of all citizens, thus assuming an entirely different political implication from those in the residual welfare states. In fact, having participated in the commissions and boards of these areas, women representatives became "policy-makers" in the fields that have been main concerns of ordinary women (Bergqvist, 1995, p. 215). Most of women-friendly public policies in Sweden have been designed and implemented by the these commissions and boards.

In conclusion, the institutional components of Swedish corporatism have played a critical role in achieving the present level of gender equality in Sweden. Although trade union policies have traditionally been gender neutral, they began to embrace female wage-earners' needs by creating more gender-specific policies since the late 1980s. The political parties have been the most important power base for women. Through these two institutions, especially political parties, women were connected to the corporatist decision-making bodies (inquiry commissions and lay boards), which have been of vital importance for political decision-making in Sweden. Most women-friendly public policies that allowed Swedish women to enjoy favourable conditions at work have been developed through these related channels of institutional components of corporatism.

²³ The strong support from the government strengthened the Commissioners in their negotiations with groups that nominated their representatives to commissions and boards. The government also took steps to improve coordination among the ministries to back up the activities of the Commission.

4. ***Women's associations and their roles in promoting Decent Work***

Women's associations in Sweden have a long history dating back to the nineteenth century, the golden age of Swedish social movements. However, these women's organizations in Sweden had generally been seen as weak. Strikingly, Briskin (1999a, p. 12) singles out only *two* associations that focus specifically on women's rights in Sweden today: the Fredrika Bremer Association and the Swedish Organizations of Emergency Shelters for Battered Women (SOES). Although SOES has raised an important problem of violence against women and has made great progress in this field,²⁴ its activities tended to be limited to this rather narrow area that is not major concern of this paper. The Fredrika Bremer Association is the oldest women's association in Sweden. Since it was founded in 1884, the association has functioned as an external pressure group that aimed to improve the status of women. However, the assessments of this association vary significantly among researchers. Maillé and Wängnerude (1999, p. 201), for example, note that the impact of this association on gender politics has been considerable and its work has been innovative and active over a long period. In contrast, Mahon (1999, p. 265) and Briskin (1999a, p. 37) argue that this 'bourgeois' women's association maintained the 'traditional sex-role approach' and did not play a major role in equality reforms in Sweden.²⁵

As noted, women's organizing is primarily found inside political parties in Sweden. We have seen that this "insider" strategy has been fruitful by and large. However, this strategy was not always been effective enough, mainly due to the conflicting interests in their own institutions and the consequent lukewarm attitude of the leadership. Furthermore, women politicians had to follow the official positions of their own parties, even when they were not content with those positions. It was women networks that filled such a gap in the interest representation of women provided by political parties. As an informal, ad hoc basis, or temporary form of association, rather than a fully autonomous organization with more enduring organizational structure, networks appeared as a unique device for organizing women in the sixties, and emerged as an important actor in Swedish women's movements in the nineties.

A good example of these women's networks in the sixties was *Group 222*. Group 222 is the most frequently quoted women's association to have played an important role in equality reforms in the sixties and seventies. It was basically a cross-party network of women in the Social Democratic, Liberal, and Left Party. However, the network was extended to include women who were influential in trade unions, national media, and research institutions. In the sex-role debate in the sixties, this network worked as a pioneering advocate for the universal breadwinner model. Its agenda included an individual taxation, labour market policy reforms, the extension of daycare facilities, the introduction of parental leave, sex-neutral education, and more liberal abortion. Group 222, as an outsider to the corporatist institutions, actively mobilized public awareness concerning the necessity of equality reforms without being constrained by the loyalty problem. It succeeded in gaining support from women in community-based organizations as well as from professionals and highly educated women (Bergqvist and Findlay, 1999, pp. 122-3; Mahon, 1999, p. 242). This public support in turn helped women politicians, the insiders, win over opponents in political parties, which was critical in turning Group 222's proposals into public policies. Therefore, at first sight, it appeared that a series of reforms in the sixties and seventies were products of close collaboration between outsiders and insiders. However, most members of Group 222, the outsiders,

²⁴ For more on the SOES, see Eliasson and Lundy (1999).

²⁵ According to Briskin (1999a, p. 37), "'traditional sex-role approach' means that the organization focuses on men and women having same rights and responsibilities, and does not specially take up women's rights or discrimination against women".

had a membership of the institutions inside the corporatist system at the same time. This suggests that Group 222 was a unique organizational device to connect women working in different institutions of the corporatist system.

It is not easy to find significant activities of women's associations between the seventies and the eighties, as "women in Sweden worked almost exclusively as insiders using political parties as a basis for organizing for women's equality" (Berqvist and Findlay, 1999).²⁶ However, women's associations began to revitalize in the late eighties and became more visible in the nineties. There are several reasons for this. First is the crisis of the welfare state in the 1980s and afterwards. The drastic reduction in municipal grants in the nineties led to a massive scale of job loss and the intensification of labour in the public sector, as well as deterioration in childcare and other services. All of these disproportionately affected women as employees, job-seekers, and caregivers. Second, as noted earlier, women's representation in the parliament was reduced from 37.5 to 33.4 per cent after the 1991 election. Third, the recent feminization of the LO membership and its new strategy of solidaristic work helped LO change its negative attitude towards women's separate organizing (Higgins 1996, pp. 175-6; Briskin 1999b, p. 168). Whilst the first two factors caused great concern among women, and thereby galvanized women's movements, the last factor opened a new opportunity for women workers to express their concerns.

Overall, these changes revitalized women's movements in Sweden, and the age of "the third feminist wave" began. These revitalized women's movements appeared again in the form of networks. Women's networks have sprung up at all levels of social practice, not least in the union movement and the political arena. Although networks were often used in mobilizing women in Sweden, they have had special meaning as an instrument of separate collective action for "women as women" in the recent situation. Equipped with emphasis on more targeted organizational resources, they began to represent women's interests based on a clearer gender perspective than in the past (Curtin and Higgins, 1998).

In this regard, *Tjejligan* (The Women's Gang) provides a good example. The Women's Gang started as a women's informal meeting in the LO and developed into a cross-union network. It began with only 20 members to highlight women's issues both in the union movement and in the social-democratic campaign for the 1991 election. At first they were faced with the usual objections from the male members against separate women's organization. However, this atmosphere soon changed. This was because the union leadership came to acknowledge the increasing importance of women members in harnessing their political energy towards the solidaristic work strategy. According to Curtin and Higgins (1998, p. 83), however, this was not the only reason: the LO also decided to support the Women's Gang as a "gift" to the beleaguered the SAP in the midst of the electoral campaign in 1991, as the LO leadership wanted the network to resecure women's loyalty to the party.²⁷ The 1991 LO congress eventually approved the Women's Gang as an entirely "independent" women's network, *but* with financial support from the head office and administrative back-up at central, district, and section level throughout its organization. With its emphasis on local connections and grassroots activism, the Women's Gang has become the exemplar of the new, unconventional way of organizing, which was entirely compatible with LO's strategy of solidaristic work (Mahon, 1996, pp. 560-1; Curtin and Higgins, 1998, p. 83). Today, Women's Gang is "a network of networks". By 1998, it had grown into a cross-union association with 14,000 members, of whom some 20 per cent were not LO members.

²⁶ GROUP 8 was another important women's network in the 1970s. As a radical socialist feminist group, this network was particularly concerned with women's sexuality, pornography, and violence against women. Though Eduards evaluated it as "the most influential part of the women's movement in the 1970s," its agenda was not reflected in the reforms of the early 1970s (Eduards, 1991, p. 176; Bergqvist and Findlay, 1999, p. 128).

²⁷ Though the SAP lost the election, more women (52 per cent) than men voted for the SAP again (Mahon, 1996, p. 560).

The main aims of Women's Gang today are to mount pressure on the LO and its affiliates to pursue gender equality seriously, to support women who run for union and political offices, and to provide elected women members with an ongoing frame of references including continuous contact with female rank and file members. Concerning the roles in delivering decent work for women, the Women's Gang, with other women's networks, has been functioning as a standard support device in the work life reform that aimed at breaking down gender segregation and women's exclusion from well-paid, responsible positions and career path (Curtin and Higgins, 1998, pp. 82-3; Briskin 1999b, pp. 164-5). The success of Women's Gang encouraged women in many affiliated union headquarters and regional branches to organize independent networks. *Kvinnors Rätt till Arbete* (Women's Right to Work), a campaign group established in 1994, is a good example. It consisted of women from the LO, the TCO, and the SACO (Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations), and marked a turning point for women's cooperation among different trade unions (Briskin, 1999b, pp. 168-9).

Stödstrumporna (Support Stockings) is another women's association that deserves particular attention. While Women's Gang and Women's Right to Work concentrated on women's work, this network placed more weight on improving women's political representation. Support Stockings was organized as a cross-party network including well-known academics and intellectual women after the sharp decrease in women members in the parliament in 1991. Under the slogan "Half the power and the whole wage," this network announced that it would create a women's party unless the established parties realized gender equality in political representation. As it successfully captured the attention from the mass media and mobilized public support²⁸, women inside the political parties were able to put the issue of gender parity on the urgent agenda of their political parties. These pressures induced the major political parties (except the Moderates) to introduce a "layered electoral list" that strictly alternated female and male candidates. This policy ensured that women won 41 per cent of the seats in the parliament in the 1994 election. Since the 1998 election, all political parties are now committed to their equal representation (Curtin and Higgins 1998, 81; Berqvist and Findlay, 1999, p. 137).²⁹

As shown in the above examples, the roles of women's associations in promoting gender equality increased markedly in the 1990s. However, it is still hard to say that women's associations have played a critical role in achieving the present level of gender equality in Sweden. They have been a few in number, and their roles have been largely supplementary to those of the insiders of the established corporatist institutions, even in the 1990s. In addition, women's associations tended to be located on the edge of the established corporatist system as an informal network, suggesting their organizational weakness. For example, Group 222 and Support Stockings were organized on the border between the political party system and the outside. Most of their members came from the political parties and they collaborated closely with their "insider" colleagues. Women's Gang is located closer to the inside (the LO) than Group 222 and Support Stockings.

Nevertheless, it should also be noted that women's associations in Sweden have played their own unique role in promoting gender equality. They pointed out persuasively the problems that women in the "woman-friendly welfare state" had faced. As a group directly affected by these problems, they broke the silence, named women's problems, and provided parameters of what should be included in public policies, taking advantage of detailed information and knowledge they have. Such 'awareness raising' (Offe, 1985; Klandermans, 1988) and 'information provision' (Sable 1994) were not appropriately done by their political allies in the established institutions: male allies were not sensitive to women (workers') problems and female comrades were rather

²⁸ According to a poll taken before the 1994 election, 40 per cent of respondents said they would vote for this new party, once it was established (Curtin and Higgins, 1998, p. 81).

²⁹ Support Stockings declined in relative importance as a victim of its success after its main goal was achieved, and now has a low profile.

constrained by their loyalty to their own institutions. This unique role of women's associations suggests that they filled, to some extent, the gap in representation of women in the corporatist system. By doing this, they also have fertilized women-friendly reforms behind the established institutions.

5. *Concluding remarks*

Swedish women have pursued their goal of gender equality mainly through the country's corporatist structures rather than their own autonomous organizations. In other words, Swedish women chose a 'voice' in the Swedish corporatism rather than an 'exit' from it: being 'insiders' rather than 'outsiders'. As insiders, Swedish women have been largely influential and powerful. In the trade unions and the political parties, they have been fairly successful in promoting gender equality. In contrast, as outsiders, they have been weak and somewhat invisible. The role of independent women's associations has been rather limited, compared to that of women in the established corporatist institutions.

There are several reasons for such "weakness" or "invisibility" of the independent women's associations. Above all, we can indicate "the political opportunity structure" of Sweden as the most fundamental or comprehensive reason. In social movement theories, political opportunity structure is defined as the specific constellation of political factors that affect the emergence and development of a social movements.³⁰ Jenkins and Klandermans (1995) note that "opportunities are primarily structured by the organization of the state, the cohesion and alignment of political elites and the structure, ideology, and composition of parties".³¹ In this regard, Swedish women have also had to organize themselves "in circumstances not of their own choosing" (Mahon, 1999, p. 262). When Swedish women began to raise gender-equality issues, the corporatist institutional arrangements already existed as an established political opportunity structure, providing constraints and possibilities for women's movements. Swedish politics have been organized primarily on the basis of class and there existed a well-established representational system linking various organizations in civil society to the party system, the corporatist decision-making bodies, and the state (Briskin, 1999a, p. 11). In this political opportunity structure, being an 'insider' of corporatism might be the best strategy for women to be politically influential, and they did so.

Second, the established Swedish corporatist system has been inclusive enough for women to be incorporated into it. Swedish corporatism has been responsive to women's demands especially since it encouraged women to participate in the labour market in the 1960s. Not only has the Swedish corporatist system helped women better reconcile paid work and family responsibility through various public policies, but it also gave them the opportunity to take part in the different levels of the policy-making process. Furthermore, when women's movements challenged the corporatist structure from outside, it usually internalized their claims without much difficulty. For example, the basic idea of the dual breadwinner model claimed by Group 222 were realized by a series of equality reforms of the SAP in the sixties and the seventies. The LO finally approved Women's Gang as an "independent" women's network, with financial support and administrative back-up from the union. The SAP and other political parties were so responsive to Support Stockings'

³⁰ The term of political opportunity structure was originally developed Peter Eisinger (1973). He defined it as "the openings, weak spots, barriers and resources of the political system itself". The definition was further elaborated by Sidney Tarrow (1983, 1989), who suggested four dimensions: "the degree of openness or closure of formal political process, the degree of stability of political alignment, the availability and strategic posture of potential alliance partners, and political conflicts within and among elites" (quoted from Kriesi, 1995, p. 167; Briskin, 1999a, p. 36).

demand for gender parity that the mid nineties witnessed near-parity in the Swedish parliament and the cabinet. Consequently, “there was less pressure on Swedish women to organize themselves outside” (Bergqvist and Findlay, 1999).

Lastly, Swedish corporatism had traditionally been negative to separate organizations of women. As mentioned above, the LO was against any women’s separate caucusing. While the SAP, along with other political parties, allowed its women members to organize their own federations within the party, its attitude to women’s independent organizations *outside* the party was negative for a long time. Such negative attitudes of the LO and the SAP towards women’s separate organizations are basically attributable to the consensus-seeking ideology of corporatist politics. The LO and the SAP had been reluctant to address the gender disparities in power and privilege (Briskin, 1999a, p. 18). Therefore, when an independent women’s organization indicated the presence of women’s problems, the LO and the SAP did not feel comfortable. Furthermore, they did not want an independent women’s organization to attract their female members. All of aforementioned factors induced Swedish women to stay as insiders in the corporatist system while marginalizing women’s organizations in Swedish gender politics.

In addition to inducing women to be insiders, Swedish corporatism had several important effects on the characteristics of women’s independent associations. First, an informal network became their main organizational form. As noted earlier, this can be seen as an outcome of the situation where women issues need to be addressed independently of the existing corporatist system while taking full advantage of it, hence staying mainly as insiders. Women were generally unwilling to formalize structures of their cross-union, cross-party networks, and to challenge the heavily institutionalized structure of corporatism. Instead, they preferred informal, temporary, ad hoc basis cooperation and thus rarely established an ongoing umbrella organization. They also preferred cooperation at the regional, not the central level. (Briskin, 1999a, p. 13). As a result, these informal networks have tended to be located on the edge of the corporatism system, as the members of these networks continue to stay inside the corporatist institutions.

Second, the strong corporatism in Sweden has tended to marginalize independent women’s associations in terms of their roles as well as political influence. This seems to be particularly true of their role in promoting decent work. As seen in Section 2, Swedish women workers, are enjoying far more favourable conditions than their counterparts in other countries. Considering this situation, it is not surprising to see that activities for women’s association have been relatively limited in Sweden. For example, some of the important tasks conducted by women’s associations in developing countries —such as creating employment for socially excluded women, representation of women workers in the informal sector, and provision of social services, etc.— have not been major agenda items for women’s associations in Sweden. Instead, they have worked on rather limited areas: gender parity in politics, pay equity, the improvement of working conditions for atypical women workers, and more advanced public policies that enable women workers to harmonize family and work. For the same reason, these associations were not “operational” associations that created employment and delivered social services, but “advocacy” associations that concentrated on monitoring and awareness raising.

These unique characteristics of independent women’s association in Sweden, i.e., organizational weakness and limited role, are criticized by some feminists as a result of “co-optation”. For example, Eduards argues that “political parties in Sweden have been remarkably efficient in co-opting both extra-parliamentary ideas and activists. The social democratic strategy is to minimize the room for alternative organizations by incorporating women and women’s demands into traditional political institutions. This ‘state feminism’ gives women material benefits but drains the women’s movements of force (Eduards, 1988, p. 15 quoted from Briskin, 1999a, p. 12)”. However, as Ferree and Martin pointed out succinctly, we cannot make a universal verdict that one type of women’s organizational strategy is more effective than another. “Different organizational forms (such as grass-roots and participatory service-delivery, mass-membership mobilization for lobbying or demonstrations, expertise-centred education efforts, and identity-oriented, cultural building

work) all play important and distinctive roles (1995, p. 10)". This is also the case for the relationship between insiders and outsiders in women's movements in Sweden. As women's network was organized on the border between the inside and the outside, it became easier for insiders and outsiders to collaborate and to achieve their common goal. Furthermore, there is no clear evidence that Swedish female bureaucrats have given up their initial feminist values in exchange for institutional power (Berqvist, 1995, p. 209). Rather, Swedish experience provides an interesting case in which "those on the outside make space for the inside. The radical claims of those outside accelerate the impulse towards change and give the appearance of 'reason' to the demands of those on the inside (Barbara Pocock, 1996, quoted from Briskin, 1999a, p.15)".

In conclusion, given the political opportunity structure, Swedish women have organized themselves appropriately. Being an insider of the corporatist structure on the one hand, and building a network on the border of the established system on the other, seems to have been an effective way of organizing for Swedish women. It also needs to be noted that the latter, women's networks have played their own role, which should not be underestimated. Although their roles in materializing gender equality have been rather limited, they found their unique role as a vanguard advocate on the edge of the corporatist system, and fertilized women-friendly reforms in Sweden.

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