EUROPE CRAWLS AHEAD ...

By Megan Rowling

As Speaker of the Riksdagen, the Swedish parliament, Birgitta Dahl holds Sweden's second-highest political office. But when she was first elected back in 1969, as a 30-year-old single mother, she was regarded as "very odd."

"To be accepted and respected, you had to act like a bad copy of a man," Dahl recalls of her early years in politics. "But we tried to change that, and we never gave up our identity. Now women have competence in Parliament, and they have changed its performance and priorities."

Back then, women of her generation were eager for change. From the beginning, they based their demands on the right of the individual—whether male or female—to have equal access to education, work and social security. And as politicians, they fought hard to build a legal framework for good childcare and parental leave, for fathers as well as mothers. "We got this kind of legislation through," Dahl says, "even though it took 15 years of serious conflict, debate and struggle."

And their efforts paid off. Sweden now has the highest proportion of women parliamentarians in the world, at 42.7 percent—up from just 12 percent in 1969. Two of its three deputy speakers are also women. Other Nordic countries too have high levels of female representation: In rankings compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Denmark takes second place behind Sweden, with women accounting for 38 percent of parliament members, followed by Finland and Norway with around 36.5 percent. (Finland also has one of the world's 11 women heads of state.) These nations' Social Democratic and far-left governing coalitions have made impressive progress toward equality in all areas of society in the past 40 years. But the nature of their electoral systems is also very important.

Julie Ballington, gender project officer at the Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), points out that the top 10 countries in the IPU ranking all use some form of proportional representation. This kind of voting system, in which parties are allocated seats in multi-member districts according to the percentage of votes they win, Ballington says, "offers a way to address gender imbalance in parliaments." With single-member districts, parties are often under pressure to choose a male candidate. But where they can contest and win more than one seat per constituency, they tend to be more willing to field female candidates. And by improving the gender balance on their slates, they widen their appeal among women voters.

Most European countries now use proportional representation or a combination of proportional representation and majoritarian voting, the system in use in the United States and the United Kingdom. In Europe, the widespread use of proportional representation has boosted the number of women politicians—particularly in the past three decades. And in the Nordic countries, where left-wing parties have enjoyed long periods in power and feminism has received strong support, the combination of these factors has led to significant progress toward gender parity in politics.

But even within Europe, some countries continue to lag behind. In Britain, which uses a single-member district plurality system, women members of parliament make up just 17.9 percent of the House of Commons. In the general elections of 2001, the ruling Labour Party stipulated that half those on its candidate shortlists be women. But research conducted by the Fawcett Society, a British organization that campaigns for gender equity, showed that some female hopefuls experienced overt discrimination and even sexual harassment when interviewed by local party members during the selection process.

"You are told things like 'your children are better off with you at home' ... 'you are the best candidate but we are not ready for a woman.' They would select the donkey rather than the woman," said one candidate. Another complained: "They are absolutely adamant they will not consider a woman. ... It was said to me ... 'we do enjoy watching you speak—we always imagine what your knickers are like.' It is that basic." In light of such attitudes, it is not surprising that women candidates were selected for only four out of 38 vacant seats.

Thanks to new governmental legislation, however, the party is set to reintroduce the controversial method of all-women shortlists it used in the general election of 1997. The use of

The Official Word

Amy Dean
President, South Bay AFL-CIO
San Jose, California

Several years ago I saw something I've never forgotten. One day my counterpart in a set of difficult contract negotiations was accompanied by his supervisor. The boss wasn't there to step in and cut the final deal, but only to offer moral support to his staff. It was a small gesture, but it was a reminder that leadership isn't always about stepping out in front of others, but knowing how to let others step in front of you.

That's something those in leadership positions sometimes forget, but it's something particularly important for women to remember. Feminism's mission has always been about more than helping women win power; it also teaches us to transform the way it's exercised. Today, when women gain authority, too often we set aside our skills in collaboration and team building and instead adopt the most conventional approach to leadership. As a result we miss the opportunity to exercise leadership in the most meaningful way possible: by helping unleash the talents of others.

Most women leaders believe in serving as a role model for young girls. That's great, but that's only where our responsibilities begin. It's also our job to help other women into leadership positions. The way to do that isn't by encouraging younger women to change who they are to fit the status quo, but to challenge the status quo so others better appreciate the crucial leadership women can offer.

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The *Official* Word

Rep. Lynn Woolsey
D-California

When my children were 1, 3 and 5, my husband left us, and I found myself in a position I never imagined: a single mother taking care of three small children. Even though I was working, I had to go on welfare.

Because I had job skills and education, I was able to land a job. But while I was going through this difficult time, I couldn't stop thinking about all the other women in the same situation. I felt lucky. I was healthy, my children were healthy, I was educated. I never questioned that this obstacle in my life was temporary, and you know that I was assertive. I couldn't help but think how difficult it would be for women who were not educated, who did not have extended family support, who were victims of domestic violence, whose children were sick.

That is one of the main reasons I decided to run for City Council in my hometown of Petaluma, California. My family succeeded because of government assistance, and I wanted to do my all to help families in similar situations. My experience as a welfare mom drew me into politics, and my passion for serving my community got me elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

I continue to fight for welfare moms and working families, to protect our environment and to provide a bright future for our children. In the coming year, I plan to introduce legislation that will help improve the lives of working families and their children at all stages of development. It will include paid family leave after the birth of a child, increased funding for childcare, school breakfast for all students and help for working families taking care of aging parents.

these shortlists saw the number of British women MPs double to 120 in that election, which swept Labour to power with a landslide victory. The technique was later ruled illegal because it was judged to discriminate against men. But in early 2002, the government returned to the idea, passing a bill that will allow political parties to take measures in favor of women when choosing parliamentary candidates—what's often referred to as "positive discrimination."

Judith Squires, a political researcher at Bristol University, believes that the new legislation got such an easy ride partly because it does not stipulate that parties must take action: "We had expected it to be a hard battle. But there has been a change of mood in the Conservative Party, and the fact that it is permissive, and there is a sunset clause [the legislation expires in 2015], all helped to push it through."

"People are waking up and saying that it's not right that there are so few women in politics."

In France, where until the recent election women accounted for only 10.9 percent of National Assembly members, the government opted for a more extreme method: a law aimed at securing political parity between men and women. Now half of all contesting parties' candidates in National Assembly elections and most local ballots must be women. In National Assembly elections, which do not use proportional representation, parties that deviate from the 50 percent target by more than two percent are fined a proportion of their public financing.

The law's first test in the municipal elections of March 2001 saw the percentage of elected women councilors in towns of more than 3,500 almost double, to 47.5 percent. But in June's National Assembly elections, the proportion of women deputies increased by less than 1.5 points, to just 12.3 percent—way below expectations. The main factor behind this disappointing result was the success of right-wing parties that ignored the new law, says Mariette Sineau, research director at the Center for the Study of French Political Life. "The big parties decided it was better to incur the financial penalty than to sacrifice their 'favored sons.' And this was particularly so with parties on the right."

Another problem with the law, Sineau explains, is that it does not apply to regional assemblies, "which is a shame, because most National Assembly deputies are recruited there." And the recent victory of the right suggests that France's ruling—and predominantly male—elite are in no hurry to change the system that has allowed them to hold on to power up until now, law or no law. As Chantal Cauquil, a French deputy at the European Parliament and member of the Workers' Struggle Party, argues, other aspects of French society must change before real parity can be achieved. "There's no doubt that economic and social conditions—which weigh on women earning the lowest salaries, in the most precarious situations, and with the biggest problems caused by a notable lack of childcare infrastructure—have a negative impact on women's political participation," she says. Moreover, governing parties of both the right and left are influenced by social prejudices and are not inclined to regard women as full citizens. It requires real political will to go against such prejudices and allow women to take on the same responsibilities as men."

Such deep-rooted but hidden obstacles, faced by women everywhere, are precisely why proponents of the use of gender quotas on lists for both party and national elections believe positive discrimination is essential. "Everybody hates quotas, and everyone wishes they weren't necessary," says Drude Dahlerup, professor of politics at the University of Stockholm. "But we have to start from the point that there are structural barriers. Then quotas can be seen as compensation." Currently, political parties in some 40 countries appear to agree, with quota systems in operation from Argentina and India to Uganda.

The use of quotas in Europe varies significantly from country to country and from party to party, but where a quota system is applied, it tends to lead to a rise in women's representation. In 1988, for example, Germany's Social Democrats adopted a system of flexible quotas, under which at least one-third of all candidates for internal party election must be female—and between 1987 and 1990, the number of Social Democratic women in the German parliament, the Bundestag, doubled. In Sweden, parties

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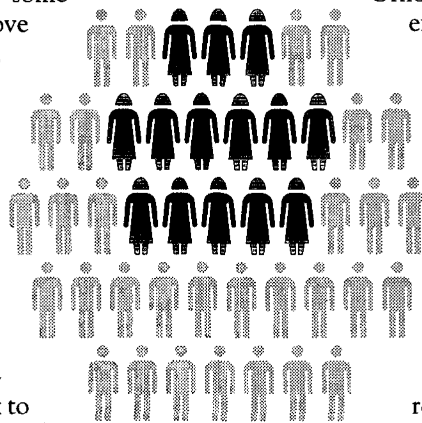
didn't introduce quotas until the '90s, but the principle of "Varannan Damernas" ("Every Other Seat A Woman's Seat") has been widespread since the '80s. Dahl, the Swedish speaker, argues that "it is not only legislation that changes the world, but convincing people that change is necessary."

Yet, as Dahlerup notes, women in some Scandinavian countries have worked to improve gender equality since the end of World War I, and "other countries are not going to wait that long—they are showing impatience." "Critical mass," or the level of representation above which women make a real difference to the political agenda, is widely judged to be around 30 percent. And in countries such as France and the United Kingdom, where that is still a long way off, measures such as parity laws and all-women shortlists are a way to speed up progress.



Even in countries that are close to achieving political parity, however, women are quick to warn against complacency. Dahlerup emphasizes the case of Denmark, where quotas have been abandoned. "Young women say they don't want and don't need quotas. The discourse is that equality has already been achieved. But I think Denmark could go backward again, and that is dangerous."

Squires of Bristol University also talks about a backlash in Britain's Liberal Democratic Party against what younger women regard as "old-fashioned feminist policies." At the party conference last year, she says, many women in their twenties and early thirties lobbied against any form of positive discrimination, wearing pink T-shirts emblazoned with the words "I'm not a token woman." But Squires suggests that this attitude is somewhat misguided: "All parties [in the United Kingdom] have set criteria that discriminate against women. It is not a supply-side problem, it is a demand-side problem."

In an attempt to address this "demand-side problem," activists are targeting not only national political institutions, but also those of the European Union. The number of women members of the European Parliament increased from 25.7 percent in 1994 to 29.9 percent in the 1999 elections—not very impressive considering that some countries introduced proportional representation voting, and some parties alternated women and men on their lists to boost women's chances. More worrying perhaps is the gender imbalance in the Convention on the Future of Europe, a body charged with the important task of drafting a new treaty for the European Union. Its presidium includes only two women among its 12 members, and the convention itself only 19 out of 118 members.

"The establishment of the convention is a response to the need for transparency and democracy. How can we explain the fact that women are not included?" asks Denise Fuchs, president of the European Women's Lobby. "It is simply not coherent." The EWL has launched a campaign to rectify the problem and is lobbying to achieve parity democracy across all other European institutions as well.

Yvonne Galligan, director of the Belfast-based Center for Advancement of Women in Politics, points out that "there has been a groundswell of support for women in political life across Western Europe, but this has not yet translated into numbers in the United Kingdom, Ireland and the European Union." In May's elections in the Irish Republic, for example, women parliamentarians in Ireland's Dail gained just one seat, and are now at 12.7 percent, according to the IPU.

Galligan is now working with political parties to set targets for Ireland's local elections in a couple of years' time—a tough job, because most parties oppose any form of positive discrimination. Parity in Ireland isn't likely to happen for a long while yet, but Galligan believes the social backdrop is improving. She cites a controversial referendum in March, in which the Irish electorate narrowly voted against a proposal to tighten the country's strict abortion laws even further. "That raised the status of women," she explains. "The underlying question was, how do we perceive the role of women? Now that is carrying over into elections. People are waking up and saying that it's not right that there are so few women in politics."

But where a sea-change in attitudes has not already occurred, it is almost certainly emerging. Naturally, there are fears that the apparent resurgence of the right in Europe could reverse the trend. But most of those interviewed for this article say women have already progressed far enough to prevent a significant decline in representation.

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As Linda McAvan, deputy leader of Britain's Labour MEPs, argues: "If we look at how things were 20 years ago, they have changed enormously. Young women are different now. They see what has been done by women politicians before them, and they want to do it too." ■

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DEFYING EXPECTATIONS

The experience of Muslim countries suggests that having a female leader isn't always enough.

The image of a woman president is an appealing one for many feminists. Yet in this era of remarkable gains in women's rights and gender equality, it is a goal that remains elusive. Only 11 countries in the world, out of more than 180, are headed by women. Of those, Muslim countries offer a particularly complex example. How is it that some of the worst countries in the world for women have women leaders? And what are those leaders doing for women?

Despite often vibrant feminist organizing, disillusionment with women leaders still seems to be the rule—in Turkey and Pakistan, women's rights activists caution that, like their male counterparts, female politicians tend to shift with the political winds. And for Muslim countries, the presence of conservative interpretations of Sharia law, the customary law of Islam, can often make the difference between inequitable treatment of women and a more promising set of conditions. Senegal and Indonesia represent the latest hopes for women politicians. Such leaders may be a crucial symbol for young girls, raising their aspirations and encouraging them to get involved in politics.

In the early '90s, Tansu Ciller embodied the hopes of millions of Turkish women. Confident, well-educated and one of the most prominent politicians in Turkey, many believed she signaled a new, more democratic direction in Turkish politics. "A lot of women voted for her because they thought she would be a key actor for women's rights and against Islamic fundamentalism," says Pinar Ilkkaracan, founder of Women for Women's Human Rights.

AGUS SUTEDJO / GETTY

Megawati Sukarnoputri speaks at a campaign rally before her election in 2001.

But upon taking office as prime minister in 1993, not only did Ciller abandon her campaign stance in support of women's rights, she soon swung to the right, adopting a hard line toward Kurdish separatists and strengthening ties between her government, the police and the secret service. She was eventually forced out of government in 1996 after several parliamentary investigations of corruption.

Ciller remains a significant political figure in Turkey, though her True Path Party is no longer in power. But feminists have lost interest. "Even those who voted for her were extremely disappointed," Ilkkaracan says. "She did absolutely nothing."

Despite a new civil code passed earlier this year that provides substantially more freedom to women (Turkey has not followed Sharia law since the '20s),

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