1 'The gender-progressive Nordics'

A matter of history

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The Nordic countries have worked together for over four decades to improve gender equality in all aspects of society. Gender equality between the sexes is a condition for the success of the Nordic Model and a pillar of the modern Nordic welfare states.

(Nordic Co-operation, n.d.)

History is an important resource in the current attempt to brand the Nordics as pioneers of gender equality. The Nordic Council of Ministers, for instance, explains the success of the 'Nordic Model' and the 'Nordic welfare states' as the result of enduring Nordic collaboration on gender equality over decades. Yet evoking history to make the region shine in this way, as champions of gender equality and progressive social models, is not simply a reflection of historical developments but also involves contemporary constructions of the past. In fact, the geographical area known as *Norden* has no common historical meaning to those who inhabit it today. Since the nineteenth century, five distinct nations have belonged to the Nordic area. Each has its own national language, culture and historical identity, its own set of myths and heroes, stars of independence and national events to commemorate. Surely this makes it difficult to claim pan-Nordic ownership of a value such as gender equality in the way that the Nordic Council of Ministers does, on this occasion to enhance the reputation of the region as a knowledge hub.

Besides, for individual Nordic countries, the historical experience of being Nordic is not necessarily a unified memory.¹ Until the mid-twentieth century, the Nordics were more rivals than friends. While Sweden and Denmark were the monarchs, Finland, Norway and Iceland were the underdogs. This historical asymmetry also affects how history is used today to brand the Nordic nations as gender-equal. Rather than showcasing the historical legacy of the region as women-friendly, Nordic countries flash their own individual historical breakthroughs as gender-progressive states and societies. A very telling example in this respect is Finland, which, according to the governmental webpage, is a pioneer of gender equality on account of its

early enfranchisement of women (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland, n.d. a). Under the headline ‘Finland Is a Gender Pioneer’, it is declared that ‘Finland is one of the world’s leading countries in fostering gender equality. It was the first county to grant women full political rights’ (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland, n.d. b). Yet Finland’s decision to flaunt its early enfranchisement of women is far from coincidental. Women’s right to vote has been a standard of appropriate behaviour among states, and thus a symbol for the fulfilment of democratic rights in general, since the end of World War I (Towns, 2010: 119–120). This means that the nation-branding of individual Nordic states is not just situated within a historical context in which certain laws and reforms were made to better the gender rights of women and men. The national imagining of individual Nordic countries as gender pioneers is also done by evoking a past that aims to favour them globally in the present. Thus, the key question is what historical times and roles individual Nordic countries currently construct for themselves when branding themselves as gender-equal nations. And, how do the current historical imaginings of the ‘gender-pioneering Nordic nations’ relate to the foreign images made of the Nordic region – and individual Nordic countries – a hundred years ago? The Nordic gender image is not entirely new, yet it remains somehow unclear how it developed and what role external actors played in the process.

To answer these questions, I draw upon literature that understands history and the use of history as a contemporary process of commemoration and nation-building. Pierre Nora, for example, speaks of *lieux de mémoire* – that is, sites of commemoration – and argues that this process makes history stand still in accordance with the political aims and needs (of the nation) of the present (Nora and Kritzman, 1996). In this chapter, I investigate the gender progressiveness of the Nordic countries both as a contemporary historical imagining of the Nordic nations and as a foreign image first made when women’s demands for political rights intensified at the turn of the nineteenth century (Clerc and Glover, 2015: 6). The sources used are predominantly official and governmental webpages from the five major Nordic countries. In addition, historical sources and material from the international suffrage movement, represented by the International Council of Women (ICW), the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) and the Norwegian National Suffrage Association (NNSA), have been consulted.

Best at being first!

The consistent external representation of the Nordics as gender-equal is key to understanding why individual Nordic countries now turn to history in their gender-branding discourse. We know that international interest in the small Nordic countries intensifies when the annual global indexes on gender equality are released – most often with similar results: The Nordics take it all, year after year, when it comes to gender equality. So, what can be learned

from them, the American weekly *Forbes* asked in 2018 as journalist Shelley Zalis (2018) wrote up 'Lessons from the World's Most Gender-Equal Countries'. Evidently, this strong and stable external image of the Nordic region makes it more than a challenge for its five different states to be recognized as individual stakeholders of gender equality. This has made history an important source of differentiation, a key element in all forms of branding.

Although the historical imagining of the gender-progressive Nordics has a foot in the real, it is predominantly a contemporary construct made to distinguish the individual Nordic state from other states. Wordings of differentiation are therefore frequently used when the Nordic countries present themselves to foreign audiences as gender pioneers today. This most often takes the form of self-assertive comparative statements, wherein the world or other continents hold the role of the laggard. Such statements follow a specific pattern that provides the imaginary of a historical frontrunner of gender rights: for example, 'X was the first in the world to do Y', 'X are or were the first to Y', or, more modestly, 'X did Y in time'. The webpage *Guide to Iceland*, for instance, presents Iceland as 'the first country in the world to grant equal inheritance rights to both men and women [in 1856]', as well as the country that 'had the world's first democratically elected head of state' (Chapman, n.d.). On the country's official webpage, the message is similar, although the role of Iceland as a historical gender pioneer is not linked to women's rights but to men's rights as fathers. It states: 'Iceland celebrated the millennium by introducing the first exclusive paternity leave in the world' (*Iceland.is*, n.d.). Yet, on the official governmental page, none of these examples are mentioned. Here, the image cherished is simply that Iceland remains at the top of most global rankings of gender equality. For instance, on 18 December 2019, the story created and published by the Prime Minister's Office was 'Iceland Remains the Top Country on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index' (Government of Iceland, 2019).

The second way in which history is used to enhance the credibility of the Nordics as nations with a long tradition of gender equality is by providing explanations as to why they became so gender-equal in the first place. Such use seeks to connect the countries' historical gender progressiveness to their societal, geographical, commercial or even climatic qualities. For instance, the site *Guide to Iceland* turns to Iceland's role as a seafaring nation to explain why women in old Iceland had the reputation of being strong and independent, a notion that is also supported by two of the Icelandic sagas. It elaborates:

women in Norse society could be granted a greater level of respect and freedom than their European counterparts. Women managed the finances of the household, ran the farmstead in their husband's absence and could become wealthy landowners in widowhood. They were also protected by law from unwanted attention or violence.

(Chapman, n.d.)

However, larger historical explanations of why the Nordic countries are gender-equal do not fit well within the tight format of nation-branding. The language of branding is more about declaring and exemplifying a product's qualities, not explaining why it possesses them. Accordingly, few of the Nordic states turn to history to explain the current situation in the way Iceland can be seen to do above. Denmark's official webpage provides a good illustration. This page simply affirms that Denmark is a gender pioneer by stating that such a role is old news to them: 'Women's influence in Danish politics is nothing new. In 1924, Nina Bang became the world's first female minister in a country with parliamentary democracy' (*Denmark.dk*, n.d.).

The third use of history on Nordic country webpages addressing gender equality relates to the imagining of time and progress itself. Whereas gender-equality discourses formerly focused mostly on women and sometimes men, this is no longer the case. Today, gender has become something far more diverse and fluid than it was previously. Consequently, measuring gender equality means taking into account a range of different issues, such as the rights of fathers and previously marginalized sexual groups, most often referred to under the umbrella term 'LGBTQ'. Historical landmarks are mentioned, however. For example, on the Norwegian governmental webpage, for instance, it is stated that in Norway a 'Common Marriage Act entered into force on 1 January 2009. This Act gives all lesbian and gay persons the right to enter into marriage irrespective of sexual orientation' (*Government.no*, 2019). In this way, the achievement of gender equality is not presented as a linear development, running from zero to advanced according to one dimension only, but a multi-dimensional undertaking. This supports the image that Norway, in this case, remains on top of all things related to gender.

The gender binary man–woman still dominates in Nordic gender-branding discourse. This is an aspect that will be elaborated on further in several chapters of this book, including in relation to the disparity between Nordic images made for foreign audiences and those produced for domestic political purposes (Danielsen and Larsen, 2015). Regardless of this, a very striking feature of the ways in which history helps to brand the Nordic states as gender-equal, however, is the degree of conformity seen in this area. All five Nordic countries highlight their historical legacy as gender-equal nations by flashing that they were the first to commit to the new political value of gender equality in areas that range from politics and welfare to equalized economic rights for women and civil rights for gays and lesbians, etc. As a result, the main slogan within Nordic gender-branding discourse would appear to be that the Nordics are best at gender equality because they were the first to adopt current standards of gender equality. To maintain this image, however, the Nordic countries have had to mobilize or evoke remarkably different pasts.

Different pasts evoked

History helps countries to distinguish themselves from others, at the same time as its use for purposes such as nation-branding closely relates to the

nation as an imagined community. This means that the pasts adduced when the Nordic countries communicate their gender-friendliness are never random but are instead used in various processes of nation-building and nation-branding. We have already mentioned Finland, which on its governmental webpage brands itself as the first country in the world to introduce equal political rights for men and women. This historical imagining of the Finnish nation-state is related to a 1906 amendment that was made possible because Russia, to whose empire Finland then belonged, was going through a time of revolution. Finland's role or self-imagining as a pioneer of female suffrage is thus closely related to the Finnish struggle for national independence from Russian control: universal suffrage was introduced in the same year that the country gained home rule. Yet the current use of history does not stop there. On the same webpage, Finland is presented as a country in which the struggle for gender equality began even prior to the birth of the new Finnish nation-state. The webpage states: 'A move towards the equality of women and men was taken in Finland long before the country became independent. In the 1850s, Finnish women activists read John Stuart Mill and spoke about the importance of education for girls' (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland, n.d. b). This historical representation of Finland is interesting for several reasons. First, it illustrates that the struggles for national independence and women's rights coincided in Finland (Hagemann, 2009; Blom, 2012: 611; Sulkunen, 2015: 94–96). The emancipation of women thus became a more integrated part of the Finnish national memory simply because it overlapped with the country's liberation from Russian power. Second, the image produced of Finland as an early mover on women's issues overrules the historical facts referred to in the actual branding text. One major anachronism is that Mill's book *The Subjection of Women* was first published in 1869, not in the 1850s. Of course, Mill published his *On Liberty* in 1854, which later was referred to both by supporters and opponents of women's liberation. However, this book did not explicitly address the issue of women's liberation in the way that his later book did, which sparked the first explosion of the women's movement in many countries. Hence, to argue that Finnish women were reading Mill and discussing the importance of educating girls in the 1850s is probably not historically correct. In nation-branding discourses, however, the specific serves the general, not the other way around, and the historically accurate gives way to how the nation is being imagined now. In fact, it is the delicate combination of being sufficiently specific to be trustworthy and general enough to get the quality of the nation across that characterizes the use of history in Nordic gender-branding discourses.

The Norwegian example is illuminating in this respect. According to the webpage of the Norwegian government, Norway's pioneering role as a gender-equal country can be communicated simply by declaration. The webpage states: 'Norway has a long tradition of working for women's rights and gender equality' (*Government.no*, 2020a). What this tradition consists of, however, is more unclear. Notably, when former Norwegian foreign

minister Børge Brende launched an international plan for women's rights in front of a national audience in 2016, he also justified this without explaining how Norway had become a historical pioneer of gender equality. Brende simply stated that 'Norway is a forerunner of gender equality and this legitimacy gives us the opportunity to take a lead, globally... Norway is a gender superpower' (Vandapuye, 2016: 2). However, in contrast to Iceland or Finland, when emphasizing the nation's historical landmarks in terms of gender equality, Norway is predominantly branding its role in the international arena. The Norwegian webpage tailored for foreign readers, for instance, focuses predominantly on the country's commitment to international laws and standards concerning women's rights and gender equality. According to these representations, Norway is a pioneer in the ratification of international anti-discrimination conventions. The country's legitimacy as a pioneer of gender equality is thus built on its own historical legacy and imagining as an internationally oriented (peace) nation:

The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 18 December 1979, entered into force on 3 September 1981 and has been ratified by 189 states. Norway ratified the convention on 21 May 1981.

(Government.no, 2020b)

The impression created in the above quotation from the official webpage of the Norwegian government, which has been a conservative coalition government since 2013, is that Norway has always taken its international humanitarian obligations seriously and continues to do so today. However, as a rule, the historical period in focus when Norway presents itself to the world as a gender-equal nation is the post-1970s. This differentiates Norway from Finland, as well as from Iceland and Denmark, which are all more backward-looking. Or, put the other way around, within the international arena Norway brands itself as an experienced and reliable international partner. Still, what is striking about the way in which Norway represents itself to the world is its apparent reluctance to mention the fact that the country was the first to ratify this particular international convention. Norway's use of history is thus more discreet and subtle than that of the other Nordic states. The national imagining is that to be first simply comes naturally for Norway. Such an approach stands in contrast to the role of history in the official Swedish gender-branding discourse, to which I now turn.

Sweden has long pursued a women-friendly policy, although none of the relevant historical milestones are included in the government's presentation of the country on its webpages today. Instead, the picture painted by the centre-left coalition government of 2020 is that Sweden has taken the feminist issue to another level through the 2014 launch of what had never been seen before: a feminist government with a specific feminist foreign policy.

On the governmental webpage, it is stated that 'Sweden has the first feminist government.... A feminist government ensures that a gender equality perspective is brought into policy-making on a broad front, both nationally and internationally' (Government Offices of Sweden, n.d.). Sweden is thus imagined as a country that continues to be a gender pioneer. In other words, it does not rely on history but makes it continuously in new ways. Instead of showcasing its past achievements, the Swedish government flashes its contemporary innovation regarding feminist politics.

This identity as 'progressive now' fits extremely well the role and function of Sweden as a utopia in foreign political discourses (Andersson and Hilson, 2009: 220). As Jenny Andersson and others have argued, the Swedish self-imaging as avant-garde relates to the rise of foreign perceptions of Sweden from the interwar period onwards, particularly in the USA, which later were appropriated by the Swedish authorities (Andersson and Hilson, 2009; Marklund, 2009, 2017). Within the frame of this imaginary, Sweden was an advocate of progressive values and social rights in general, and its population was held as being the most modern of all people. As a result, when branding itself as a pioneer of gender equality, Sweden is capitalizing on political and cultural images of the country that are well established both globally and domestically. Strikingly, this makes Sweden less concerned about the past when imagining itself as a gender pioneer, whereas the other Nordic countries all itemize their progress in this area, legitimizing their claims through reference to a handful of national advancements and reforms.

Clearly, this picture of Sweden as the most progressive and pioneering of all countries also needs to be seen in relation to the country's historical status and identity as a Nordic superpower within the Nordic region. In the 1600s, the country was one of Europe's most powerful military states. And during the Napoleonic Wars, Sweden was on the winning team against France that forced the Danish king to cede Norway to the Swedish king in 1814 as part of the war settlement. Swedish national identity thus seems less bound to the national awakening of the nineteenth century, at least in comparison with its neighbours to the east and west. The situation with Finland, Norway and Iceland, however, is different. At the turn of the last century, they were all claiming independence from foreign rule and began constructing histories of their own, which helped them to define themselves in opposition to their neighbouring oppressors, that is, Russia, Sweden and Denmark. Norway, gaining home rule in 1814 after 400 years under Danish rule, was until 1905 in a personal union with Sweden. Finland, on the other hand, had home rule from 1906 but remained a grand duchy in the Russian Empire until late 1917. Iceland, declared a sovereign state in 1918, was for its part in a personal union with the Danish crown until 1944. History served as a major justification and *raison d'être et faire* of the nation in all these processes of nation-building. In the early 1900s, this also helped the Nordic gender image to develop within the confines of the international suffragist

movement, an image that depicted them as frontrunners in the campaign for women's political rights. Within the frame of this imaginary, however, Sweden, the old monarch of Scandinavia, and Denmark, the second best, held no prominent roles.

The history of the Nordic gender image

Until female enfranchisement became the new normal of international society by the end of World War I, the old and so-called civilized nations were characterized by keeping women out of politics (Paxton et al., 2006; Towns, 2009). Only barbaric countries allowed women to rule, the argument went, which made the nineteenth-century state in most countries a true gentlemen's club (Towns, 2014; Florin, 2018: 29). However, this situation began to change around 1900 as a growing number of countries met women's demands for political citizenship, though a common characteristic of the first frontrunners of the female vote was that they all belonged to the growing class of newborn nation-states as opposed to the great powers represented by Great Britain, France and Germany. These latter were the leading countries of the world until the USA announced its interest in joining their ranks towards the end of the nineteenth century. With this, women's issues also entered the international scene, but not necessarily because the federal American state pushed the female issue in the same way that the country's women did. The first to make women political subjects were nations belonging to the periphery of civilization, including the countries of the Nordic region – or Scandinavia, as it was generally referred to at the time.²

Before the outbreak of World War I, New Zealand (1893), Australia (1902), Finland (1906) and Norway (1907/1913) all granted women the right to vote.³ For all but New Zealand, suffrage also meant the right to stand for election and represent the state. Evidently, this enabled the aspiring nation-states mentioned above to symbolize new sets of values on the international scene, including cultural and moral values stemming from their ability to take the female question seriously. For some countries, the female vote thus became a strategizing matter of relevance to more than domestic and party politics. Feminist claims were also included in diplomatic manoeuvring and the rising global competition for 'modernity prestige'. In Werron's (2014: 71) words, this was because new forms of public communication helped in the creation of universalized 'third parties'. Consisting of international organizations and journalists, among others, and creating new and imagined global audiences, these parties were to challenge the hegemonic status of the old monarchs of international society. As a result, the idea of women's suffrage as a sign of the progressive, civilized nation began to circulate more freely and help distinguishing states accordingly.

In June 1890, Norwegian politician John Teodor Lund from the Liberal Party argued in the Norwegian parliament that Norway could 'increase its international reputation and place in the civilized world by introducing

the female vote' (Kolstad, 1963: 35). At the time, Norway was characterized by rising nationalism and independence fever. Since 1814, the country had shared its king, foreign policy and diplomatic service with the Swedes. Lund's statement is thus an indication that the political opposition was advocating for a more independent role for Norway within the Swedish–Norwegian union. Interestingly, the term *likestilling*, which in modern Norwegian usage is strongly associated with gender equality, was in 1886 used to call for full equality between Norway and its union partner, Sweden (Danielsen et al., 2015: 13). While the demand, which was mostly about numbers of representatives in the ministry council of Sweden–Norway, responsible for foreign affairs, was not followed up, Lund's proposal appears to have been a strategy to enable Norway to be regarded as a *de facto* state with its own foreign policy – or, more precisely, a consular service to take care of the country's economic interests. Interestingly, this suggestion, to make the female vote a foreign policy tool, was made more than a decade before historian and peace activist Halvdan Koht would argue, in 1902, that Norway should commit to the development of international law and peace as an independent nation-state. In the words of Halvard Leira (2015: 22), an international relations scholar who specializes in Norway's role and identity as a 'peace nation', smallness was from early on seen as 'necessitating a focus on acting in a way that could enhance [Norway's] status'.

By the early 1900s, the female vote went from being a sign of uncivilized nations to a positive feature of the modern and progressive state. This transformation was partly the work of a rising international society of feminist organizations, but it was also closely related to small and geographically peripheral nations' drive for status and independence (Oldfield, 1992: 215; McDonald, 2009: 25–31; Towns, 2009, 2010). Women, the argument went, were as important as men for the well-being of the national home. Nordic suffragists also adopted or contributed to this discourse of nationalism (Blom, 2012). At the 1911 international suffrage conference in Stockholm, Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf (1911) argued in her speech 'Home and State' that women had done their lot for life and civilization, as well as for 'the good of the race', by creating homes and bringing human beings into the world. Consequently, they deserved the vote as much as men, since no state could exist without the traces that women had left on earth. Above all, however, the feminist nationalist discourse was a question of strategy. In the early 1900s, there was a rising need to fight down anti-suffragist sentiments and to make male parliamentarians see that it would be to the nation's advantage to take women on board. In the Nordic region, Finland was first out, in a process that, according to Irma Sulkunen (2009: 84), went 'surprisingly rapidly and almost unnoticed'. During the revolutionary fervour of 1906, the Russian tsar granted a number of Finnish political demands that included calls for the female vote and eligibility for parliament. Since 1892, universal suffrage had been a major issue for the Finnish Women's Rights Federation. And seven years later, in 1899, the Finnish Labour Party decided to

advocate for equal suffrage for men and women, which in hindsight has lent credibility to the country's claims today to be a gender-equality pioneer (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland, n.d. a). However, when the international suffragists began organizing to give force to their demands for equal political rights for women, it was Norway, not Finland, that drew the longest straw. As we will see below, racial discourses prevalent at the time were an important element in, if not a prerequisite for, the development of a Nordic gender image by an American-dominated international suffrage movement.

Looking for new success stories

For a long time, American suffragists had advocated for the need to include women in parliament by providing women with equal political rights. To achieve this goal, Elisabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, two of the most influential nineteenth-century feminists and initially members of the abolition movement, had begun to play on anti-abolition sentiments and ethnic and racialized stereotypes (Dubois, 1997: 179; Finnegan, 1999: 5). Truly, the worst case for many American feminists, originating in the white, Anglo-Saxon and protestant middle-class, was to see the free African-American man enter parliament before themselves. During the progressive era, these WASP women organized and campaigned for social reform within most social fields, from temperance and peace to welfare, civil and political rights. Still, American women lacked suffrage. Thus, in 1888 the International Council of Women (ICW) was launched as a new avenue in which WASP women might seek to advance and enhance their reputation in the eyes of men in power. However, as the German secretary Alice Salomon later described it, it was an organization built on air, as at that point in time there were no national councils that might join it (Rupp, 1997: 15).

At first, the International Council of Women was nothing more than a North American organization, with limited foundation and support beyond the USA. The women of the Nordic region were all slow to set up national councils. Sweden and Denmark did so in 1898 and 1899, respectively. Norway followed in 1904, a year before its union with Sweden was dissolved. Upon the dissolution of the union, the leader of the Norwegian National Council of Women, Gina Krog, made a small handout on Norwegian history and politics for circulation. Addressed to the ICW, the publication contained various facts to help members to differentiate between the two former partners of the Swedish–Norwegian union. Strikingly, the handout, which was written in English, put Norway in a positive light by representing Sweden as the conservative and anti-progressive ‘other’ to the new nation-state Norway: ‘In Norway there is a democracy (only half-realized, however, as women had not yet obtained political suffrage) and a thorough parliamentary system. Sweden is far more politically conservative, and her suffrage is still very limited’ (Norwegian National Council of Women, 1905: 16).

In 1911, Finland and Iceland were the last of the Nordic countries to join the growing international family of women's councils (Rupp, 1997: 16). Yet, even before then, the ICW had already faced problems. The national auxiliaries of the organization were for a long time few and weak. More importantly, the ICW's members soon stopped agreeing on its over-reaching cause – that is, female enfranchisement. With the inclusion of anti-suffragist women at the London conference in 1899, the ICW was no longer really a suffragist organization. To fill the gap created by this development, two radical-minded Germans initiated an alternative meeting. The idea of forming an independent international organization, however, came from Carrie Chapman Catt, a rising star within the American suffragist movement. In 1900, Chapman Catt succeeded Cady Stanton as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), and for 28 years, from 1904 to 1932, she was the front figure of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), which had female suffrage as its ultimate goal (Somervill, 2003: 60–61).

For the emerging discourse on the gender-progressive Nordics, this strategic and generational shift within the organized international feminist movement would prove decisive. Although the Nordic countries never became a model for other states to follow, new images of them soon began to spread. Sissel Rosland (2017: 201) has argued that to understand the significance of foreign examples within the feminist movement at the time, 'it is necessary to consider the hegemonic frames the campaigners were challenging'. Those opposing the female vote were well organized. They arranged meetings, wrote petitions and took to the streets to advocate against giving women the vote. In this context, the experiences of those countries that in fact were making progress were very valuable for those campaigning for women's enfranchisement. Accordingly, the IWSA began to tell the world that the Nordic region contained the most gender-progressive countries in the world. Or, in Chapman Catt's words, extracted from a speech at the 1908 international suffrage conference in Amsterdam: 'in actual gains the Scandinavians are in the lead. All honor to that noble race! Once it was the pioneer upon the great unknown waters of the world; now it is the leader upon the high seas of human progress' (IWSA, 1908).

That the president of the IWSA would in 1908 portray the Nordic countries as the world's pioneers in the field of gender equality, however, was not something that could be taken for granted at the time. Also on the other side of the world, down under, progress was being made. However, the physical appearance of the Nordic people was well fitted for the racialized hierarchies the international societies and suffrage communities were producing. According to Towns (2010: 92), Chapman Catt promoted the view that women were not only more civilized than men but also more civilized than 'uncivilized' women of 'lesser races'. This rhetoric also mirrored the actual power relations within the international suffragist movement led by Northern Americans and Europeans. For delegates from Southern

Europe, this would lead to frustration. The French suffragists who had at first hoped to maintain a symbolic lead within the international movement were soon to understand that the axis of the organizational monument was shifting. Karen Offen (2000: 154) writes that the torch was carried by the Anglo-American world, and that protestant representatives also took the lead on moral issues. For the leadership and discourse of the international suffragist movement, it was the Nordics that became the tool for forging a specific subject position as civilized women. At the 1909 IWSA conference in London, an Italian representative would describe the event as uniting the Anglo-Saxon race (Vangen, 2020). Later, French Germaine Malterre-Sellier would describe the IWSA's offices as a place where 'very often the Latin and oriental elements felt isolated and estranged... where a spirit predominates that I will call Nordic, for lack of another name' (Rupp, 1997: 70).

Not only was the IWSA created and run by American suffragists, but it also developed out from American needs. Additionally, it initially trumpeted the idea that the USA was the most advanced country in terms of women's rights. At its very first convention in 1902, held in Washington, DC, where all the participants were invited to the White House to meet US President Theodore Roosevelt, the divide between the Old and the New Worlds was presented as a gain for American women especially. In her address to the participants, Chapman Catt declared:

It is well known that the new countries are far more free from the mandates of custom and conventionality than the old ones; and that dissenters from established usage are far more willing to adopt new ideas and extend liberties, than those bound by traditionary beliefs.... That liberty has continued to grow until unquestionably American women are less bound by legal and social restrictions than the women of any other country, unless we except progressive Australia and New Zealand.
(IWSA, 1902: 39)

As the above quote shows, the USA was initially imagined as the frontrunner of the international suffragist movement. The new countries 'down under' were also advancing but, as indicated by the speech of Chapman Catt, who in 1904 succeeded Susan B. Anthony as president of the IWSA, New Zealand and Australia were in their eyes never worthy of the status of pioneers of women's rights. Such a view corresponded well with how things were seen also in the Nordic countries. From the formation of the first national women's rights associations in the 1880s, American women had represented an example for Nordic feminists. Gina Krog, the Norwegian suffragist and leader of the Norwegian National Women's Council, wrote in her telegram to the 1902 suffragist convention in Washington that

no other country in the world has received the inspiration in our work which we have received from the Unites States; to no women in the

world are we so indebted as to the women of your country – those great and noble pioneers.

(Krog, 1902; see also Vangen, 2020: 43)

But, with the gradual advancement of women in the Nordic countries in terms of suffrage, little by little the picture of the USA as the symbolic leader of the suffragist cause began to change.

Challenging the USA as symbolic leader

In 1901, Norwegian women received the right to vote in local elections, which the country's suffragists had campaigned for, among other things, by making reference to the American states as frontrunners. The vote was not fully won, however: the requirements were linked to economic capacity and age. However, despite these rules, which favoured women of the bourgeoisie, 100 women were elected to seats in local governments from 1901 (Larsen and Øksendal, 2013). In 1906, similar developments took place in Finland, as we know, but at the national level, which soon became front-page news in the Nordic countries and possibly beyond. The Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* could at least inform its readers on 15 June 1906 that 19 of the new representatives of the Finnish national parliament were women, a fact that was illustrated by a picture showing 13 of them (Larsen, 2013: 196). Contrary to what Sulkunen has suggested, then, the event did not pass unnoticed in other countries. Within the international suffrage movement, the Finnish victory, as it was presented, would also change the discourse on the Nordics in ways that would have an impact well beyond the movement itself.

When the IWSA was formally launched, in 1904, during the second conference held in Berlin, it managed to attract media attention. Newspapers were increasingly interested in covering the well-off and sometimes quite eccentric suffragettes and their fight for political enfranchisement. The conference, which was closely prepared by Chapman Catt and her board, was covered by several newspapers and was clearly popular with journalists and readers. The organization had also developed a media strategy: All national delegates had to prepare their addresses carefully beforehand and to arrive at the conference with multiple printed copies of their speeches in their handbags. Free copies could in this way easily be distributed to journalists and members of the audience, and the movement gained what it had worked for – increased public attention and support for its cause. At this stage, however, only Denmark and Sweden were formal members of the IWSA, although Norway would join two years later for the upcoming conference in Copenhagen. It took a further two years for Finland to join, and Iceland until 1911. Yet, compared to the previous conferences, the event in the Danish capital was a mammoth undertaking. The numbers of participants grew, as did the rules, and three different languages were used simultaneously, which says a lot about the social background of the women involved. The choice

of location for IWSA conferences was always strategic, the idea being that the conferences would increase public interest in and support for the female vote in the countries in which they were held. The president of the Danish Women's Suffrage Society, Marie Sørine Louise Nørlund, wrote in 1906 in *Jus Suffragii*, the international magazine of the IWSA, that the 1906 conference in Copenhagen had been of great benefit for the suffragists' work in Denmark. Clearly, it had contributed to a change in public opinion, which 'now is on our side' (*Jus Suffragii*, 1906: 7). However, when Finland took the first step in the Nordic region to enfranchise women at the national level, this attracted the president's attention. In Carrie Chapman Catt's words, however, the Finnish victory had come as a total surprise:

Yet suddenly, almost without warning, we see upon a summit another army. How come it there? It has neither descended from heaven, not climbed the long hard journey. Yet there above us, all the women of Finland stand today. Each wears the royal crown of the sovereignty of the self-governing citizen. Two years ago, these women would not be permitted by the law to organize a woman suffrage association. A year later, they did organize a woman suffrage committee, and before it is yet a year old, its work is done.

(Luno, 1906: 49)

Clearly downplaying the victory and effort of the Finnish women, Chapman Catt continued her narrative by presenting American women as the symbolic and practical leaders of the international suffrage movement. Finnish women, it seems, were not as qualified to be an example for others as the women of the USA, New Zealand and Australia. It was the opponents of female enfranchisement, she continued, who so persistently had refused to accept these gains of the female vote and see them as important:

They declared these States and Nations had no history and gave no assurance of a stable future; they said they were too new, their population too small, their people too impulsive and irresponsible for their acts to be taken seriously.

(Luno, 1906: 50).

This indicates that the fact that a country lacked an established history or a long stable past as a nation and state was a common argument among anti-suffragists for not taking feminist victories in new countries seriously, a point that would be taken on board by the IWSA in its propagandist discourse. In addition, the president argued that in order to be worthy of the role of inspiring others, a state had to be sovereign, or at least be in a stable environment that ensured that any success stories would continue to be successes. The fear was that feminist victories might be belittled by their opponents and that this would damage the entire suffragist movement. Her

choice of country to inspire suffragettes fell on Norway, a country that few in fact knew much about.

Trusting Norway over revolutionary Finland

By the time the IWSA organized its fourth reunion in 1908, Norway had introduced census-based national suffrage. Strikingly, the significance of this change to Norwegian law, whose terms were far less generous than the bill already passed in Finland, was emphasized in *Jus Suffragii*. The front cover of its July 1907 edition declared 'HURRAY FOR NORWAY!!!!' And when the national representatives met in Amsterdam the following year, it was Norway – and not Finland – that was presented as the country to look to for inspiration. The reason for this, the president declared, was that 'the Norwegian Act lent a new dignity and significance to all the victories which had preceded'. It was not just that Norway had granted 'full suffrage rights and eligibility to women upon exceedingly generous terms'. In terms of 'the attitude of nations towards our cause', the act of the Norwegian parliament meant far more than an isolated victory, declared Chapman Catt in her general address in Amsterdam on 15 June 1908. The strategic importance of the Norwegian victory was thus made out to be far larger than that of Finland. Again, the decisive element was the hegemonic status of the anti-suffragists. The tendency to ridicule the progress of the suffragists' cause, by belittling any achievements and minimizing the movement's influence, was widespread. It was therefore important to go for the safe option, the example that would not be ruined by the anti-suffragists.

'It is true', they say 'Finland is old enough and has creditable history, but its people are in a state of revolution; what the Czar has given, he might take away. We shall wait'. It was at this point in the world's controversy that the Norwegian victory came. Norway was a country with an honorable history, a stable and independent government. It was evident that the enfranchisement of women had been accomplished after calm deliberation, by a people acknowledge to intelligent, honest and conscientious. For the first time the opponents were compelled to admit that a genuine victory for women suffrage had scored.

(Luno, 1906: 50)

The president of the IWSA was quick to construct new and more favourable images of the Nordic region as the Nordic countries increasingly met women's demands for political citizenship. But it seems that she also knew how to differentiate between them in order to achieve the overall goal of her movement. The method used followed the terms set in the nationalist discourse at the time, according to which a country without a past and a well-defined history did not merit significant attention. Both Finland and Norway fulfilled the required criteria according to the American suffragist, who played

loosely with the facts to present them as old and noble, when in fact the old monarchies of the Nordic region were Sweden and Denmark. Furthermore, the latter countries were also on the way to allowing women to vote: 'Both countries are intelligent and progressive', which enabled Chapman Catt to feel confident that the way in which the question of women's suffrage was to be solved in the two countries would provide important lessons for those working for this cause throughout the world. Still, the Norwegian victory hung the highest: 'I venture the prediction, that, when the final chapter of the history of suffrage shall be written, it will record that the enfranchisement of the Norwegian women marked a turning point in the struggle' (Luno, 1906: 49–50).

The private correspondence of Fredrikke Marie Qvam, for years the leading figure in the Norwegian National Woman Suffragist Association, further illustrates how Chapman Catt made Norway – and not Finland – the symbolic frontrunner for the international suffragist movement. During the planning for the 1908 conference, the president wrote multiple times to Qvam at her home in Gjøvran, north of Trondheim, to make sure she would be attending the upcoming meeting. In a letter dated 19 May 1908, the IWSA president wrote: 'I have not published the list of the delegates you sent me.... I notice that you put? after your name. My Dear Fru Qvam, we really could not have an international meeting without you'.⁴ On 30 May, she wrote again to Qvam to make sure that she would not be let down by the Norwegian delegation to the conference in the Netherlands: 'I most sincerely hope and pray', wrote Chapman Catt, 'that nothing will happen to keep our dear Fru Qvam from coming. You are the chief heroine for this meeting, and we do not like to have our play going on and our heroine away'.⁵

Although few of the Norwegian suffragettes had the money to travel long distances and stay for weeks in hotels abroad, events turned out as the IWSA president had hoped. The leader of the Norwegian National Suffragist Association arrived in Amsterdam in time for the meeting. She also played the heroine role given to her by Chapman Catt: 'Since we met in Copenhagen, taxpaying women in Norway have obtained political suffrage', declared Qvam; 'about three hundred thousand women have entitled the vote, but 200,000 still lack it' (Report from Norway IWSA, 1908; see also Høyem, 2013: 90). At the subsequent conference in London in 1909, however, she spoke more optimistically and with greater confidence as the official representative of Norway. The attitude towards the female vote had changed considerably worldwide, she said, and 'nothing can better show the position, which women now occupy in Norway, than the fact that the government sends an official Representative over to this International Conference for Women's Rights' (IWSA, 1909; see also Høyem, 2013: 99).

The first request to the Norwegian parliament to make Qvam a formal representative at the IWSA conference had been made by Chapman Catt. Gunnar Knudsen, representing the Liberal Party, had himself made sure a royal resolution was prepared to authorize the 63-year-old Norwegian

suffragette for the task. The financial resources she needed to travel were granted by the government, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the passport for the voyage, granting Qvam diplomatic status.⁶ The conclusion of her speech ensured that the Norwegian government would not regret its decision to make her an official envoy. As the wife of a former prime minister, Fredrikke Marie Qvam spoke like any statesperson tasked with ensuring that her country be both seen and recognized. She concluded:

We ought to remember, that Norway is the first sovereign state, that has given the political suffrage. And now Norway says to the other Sovereign countries; Follow our example! Make the women of your countries free Citizens.⁷

A new arena for Nordic foreign policy

As the American suffragist movement turned international in the early 1900s, a new arena had opened for Nordic feminists seeking to promote the cause of the female vote to their governments. The reason was that foreign examples were, as we have seen, used to urge country after country to enfranchise women. However, the Nordic countries themselves never became models for others, but the image created of them and the Nordic region by international suffragettes, since the USA could no longer play the symbolic role of frontrunner, helped the Nordic states to redefine themselves internationally. For small status-seeking countries such as Norway, feminism and women's rights even became a matter of foreign policy, something that parliamentarian Lund had first suggested in 1890. To understand this, we have to take Norway's smallness into account.

In line with Leira, smallness was the reason why Norway turned into an obsessive status-seeker towards the end of the nineteenth century, along with the recent character of the Norwegian state. Denmark and Sweden, on the other hand, both slower than Norway to make women equal citizens to men, were far more concerned about their ranking among other states and about maintaining their position – or climbing – within the international hierarchy (Leira, 2015: 22, 24). Around the turn of the century, however, the Norwegian discourse began to change. Where previously the country's primary concern was with its status as one state among others, its status-related talk became increasingly focused on what Norway could and should do in the world, its specific characteristics as a nation, and the qualities that defined the Norwegian people and state (Leira, 2015: 31). As in the booklet produced in 1904 by the Norwegian National Council of Women on the subject of Norway's history and politics, the imagining of Norway and Norwegians was systematically contrasted with what it meant to be Swedish.

The new international role carved out for Norway after the dissolution of the Swedish–Norwegian union was related to international law and peace, not women's rights in particular. At least, this is what researchers before

me have stressed (Gram-Skjoldager and Tønnesson, 2008; Berg, 2016). Yet, from 1909 to 1913, Norway was officially represented at the annual conferences held by the IWSA. In addition, Chapman Catt visited Norway in 1911 on her way from Copenhagen to Stockholm, where the sixth congress of the IWSA was to take place. In the Danish capital, she was met by cabinet members and foreign legations. In the Norwegian capital, however, her welcome, according to the February 1911 report in *Jus Suffragii*, was as grand ‘as if she had been a reigning queen’. She and her travelling partner were distinguished guests at a luncheon in which they were seated next to Gunnar Knudsen, who was now the leader of the Liberal Party. She also held a lecture in the Aula, the university hall located just opposite the Norwegian parliament, and, most importantly, was received by King Haakon VII of Norway.

As Rosland (2017) has pointed out, the IWSA president used images of Nordic royalty in strategic ways to support her movement. During a speech in London, for example, Chapman Catt announced that the queen of Norway, who was the sister of the British monarch, King George V, was supportive of the female vote. Another story she told of the Nordic royals, first published in the *Belfast Weekly News*, concerned the attitude of the young Norwegian Prince Olav, who, according to Chapman Catt, at the age of seven had asked his mother during a visit to England ‘why uncle George did not give the vote to women of England as we have done in Norway’ and ‘saved all this trouble’ (Rosland, 2017: 203–204, with references to *Belfast Weekly News*, 11 July 1911). On her visit to Norway, however, the media-conscious suffragette met not just the king but the entire Norwegian cabinet at the reception held for her at Oslo’s Grand Hotel. Wollert Konow, who was then serving as prime minister for the new conservative government, used the opportunity to entertain the guest by suggesting that the closeness of the relationship between Norway and the USA was due to the large number of Norwegian emigrants to the latter country. However, during his speech for the evening, Norway’s official policy somehow slipped out as he partly took credit for the progress of women’s political rights in the world. In this way, the domestic imagining of Norway was to match once again the foreign image made of the country within the international suffrage movement. The Norwegian prime minister stated:

We Norwegians consider it as an honor to have been in the front of the movement of giving political franchise to women.... If you ask me: What is your experience?... I am glad to answer: Within all parties and all fractions with us there is an overwhelming consensus of opinion that we have been right, that we have moved in the right direction.

(Nylände, 1911: 158)

In the years to come, it was not just suffragist organizations such as the IWSA that were favoured by the Norwegian government. In 1909, Norway

would send Gina Krog as official envoy to the Toronto conference of the International Council of Women, an organization that had previously been forced to abandon the question of female suffrage owing to internal disagreements. And in 1914, the Norwegian authorities planned to co-host a larger international gathering on women's rights in the Norwegian capital, which was, however, postponed following the outbreak of World War I (Vangen, 2020). When the conference was finally held, in 1920, women's struggle for political rights had waned to some extent, however, or was increasingly blending in with women's growing engagement for peace, a development that is discussed further in Chapter 6 of this book by Inger Skjelsbæk and Torunn Tryggestad. They argue that peace and security have long been defined as constituting Norway's primary international role, and this influences how Norwegian foreign policy makes use of gender equality and how the past is evoked in current attempts to brand Norway as a 'peace nation'. Still, prior to World War I, it seems that the political rights of women were as important as peace and security for this small country concerned with its international role and status. Consequently, the gender-progressive image of the Nordic countries was at first very much based on the use of Norway as an example both by suffragist activists, on the one hand, and by the Norwegian government, on the other. Indeed, the decision to welcome Chapman Catt to Norway in 1911 was close to a stroke of genius for this brand-new state with scarce resources to impress on the international scene. Supporting the feminists' cause, if not free, was at least manageable. In the general address that Chapman Catt held in Stockholm a few months after her visit to the Norwegian capital, there were no limits to her praise:

I wish every doubting Thomas could see what I saw in Norway. More than all else, I wish the Parliaments of all nations could pay the country a visit.... Norway presents an ideal example of Women suffrage in practice, and it is an achievement of which we may boast with no reservation of doubt.

(Chapman Catt, 1911)

Conclusion

Historically speaking, the Nordic countries were early to adjust to what later became the new norm of international society, including measures on women's and gender rights. However, New Zealand and Australia were the first countries in the world to introduce female suffrage at a national level. This tells us that it was the strategic meaning and role ascribed to the Nordics within the feminist movement that caused the Nordic gender image to emerge as part of women's fight for political rights. The current trend of declaring that the Nordic countries were the first in the world to do favourable things for the progression of women thus builds on much older notions or images of the gender-equal Nordics. In this process, external feminist

actors, such as Chapman Catt, were central. Thus, the first lesson to be drawn from this chapter is that historical imaginings of the Nordic gender nation are a result of external images created and reframed over a longer period of time, which lately have been appropriated and used to the advantage of individual Nordic nation-states. Of course, authorities within the Nordic countries, including the Nordic Council of Ministers, have done their bit to put gender issues on the political agenda since the late 1960s (Larsen, 2020). However, the concern for gender equality as a Nordic image – or a Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic, Danish or Finnish image – has increased tremendously over the last two decades. As Christopher Browning (2015: 283) has suggested, this is closely related to two connected developments: the introduction of new technologies that have helped to foster the democratization and proliferation of information and images worldwide, and the rise of nation-branding or reputation management programmes that have helped states to exert greater control over how they are seen and represented at home and abroad. In addition, global measurements within the ‘index industry’ have increased the circulation of the Nordic gender image. This makes it increasingly difficult to differentiate between fact and fiction in relation to the gender progressiveness of the Nordic region and countries. This situation is not helped by the fact that the Nordic states are themselves blurring the boundaries by using history to brand the nation-state in a fashion that is very selective historically speaking. The historical discourse of Nordic gender-branding has an unmistakable structure: We are best at gender equality because we were first!

The use of history in the contemporary efforts to brand individual Nordic countries as gender-equal also relates, often in intricate ways, to nation-building. A number of researchers have argued that the nation was *de facto* a brand already before the current trend of nation-branding began in the late 1990s (Mordhorst, 2018: 244–245). This is true, at the same time as nation-branding is about cultivating certain associations for political or commercial purposes, whether the aim of this activity is to attract foreign investment or to secure a chair at the table of powerful organizations. How this current trend relates to the building of the nation over time has not been explicitly addressed here, but the chapter does show how history was crucial for the development of the Nordic gender image. The suffragists of the early twentieth century made explicit references to the history of the Nordic countries, their stable traditions and old monarchies, to gain support for their cause and combat anti-suffragist sentiments. Interestingly, this resembles how history is being used in current Nordic gender-branding discourses, although we should be cautious about using the notion of branding *avant la lettre* to refer to such activities (Aronczyk, 2018: 232–233).

The Nordic gender image emerged long before nation-branding occurred as a historical phenomenon, and for this reason the concept should not be used retrospectively. In fact, none of the foreign images made of the Nordic countries a hundred years ago match the historical pasts and roles evoked

by individual Nordic countries today. Accordingly, we might conclude that there is an interesting mismatch between the current historical imagining of the Nordic nations as gender-progressive and the foreign images made of the Nordic countries as frontrunners of women's rights within the context of international feminist activism and renewed nation-building a hundred years ago. The pasts evoked in current Nordic gender-branding are, besides, strikingly heterogeneous. Finland and Iceland flash the old past, the nineteenth century and beyond. Denmark is more focused on the twentieth century, albeit in a way that always remains very general. Norway, however, takes its reputation as a gender-equal frontrunner more for granted and concentrates on showing the world that it has always taken its international obligations on gender equality seriously. This indicates that the imagining of Norway as a peace nation trumps the type of feminist commitment that Sweden, for instance, is currently vigorously advocating.

Thus, the notion of the Nordic countries as historical frontrunners of gender equality cannot be seen only in relation to the historical achievements of the Nordic countries as gender-equal societies. As important as those achievements, it has been argued here, are the creation and circulation of domestic imaginings and foreign images that portray those countries as historical gender pioneers. Most of the time, this is done by stating that the countries were the first in the world to do beneficial things for the progression of women, fathers, gays and lesbians, or gender rights in general, accompanying this information with exact times and dates. At other times, the message is communicated without saying directly that they were gender frontrunners. This showcases the importance not only of history but also of context in Nordic gender-branding. When Norway, and not Finland, was envisioned as the ultimate number one in terms of the women's vote a hundred years ago, it was because it was thought to favour the feminist movement in charge of constructing this image and because the Norwegian authorities saw this image as beneficial for Norway's international standing. Today, Finland is the only Nordic country to make use of its historical achievements in this area in its efforts to gain legitimacy as an old gender-equal nation. This again shows that history is more than fixed time but works as a reservoir of different (national) imaginaries to be mobilized and commemorated for various purposes in the present. The Nordics were truly among the first in the world to recognize women's political rights, but the Nordic brand derived from how external feminist actors made the Nordic countries, and particularly Norway, into examples for other countries to follow. Or, in the words of Carrie Chapman Catt, speaking at the 1911 IWSA conference in Stockholm and discussing the argument of a Swedish professor who had declared that women's suffrage was a fad:

The Scandinavian people represent a race which does not forget its ancestors were Vikings, who sailed the seas without chart and compass. There are modern Vikings in all these lands as fearlessly ready to solve

the modern problems as were those of old. It is unlikely that all the people were bold and courageous in those ancient times. There were undoubtedly pessimistic croakers who declared the ships would never return, that the men would be lost at sea, and that the enterprises were foolhardy and silly. It is the antitype of this class which we find the university professor [opposing the female vote] but we recall that it is the Vikings who are remembered today.

(Chapman Catt, 1911)

Notes

- 1 Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland are also part of the geographical and political space called *Norden*. This chapter, however, focuses on the five main countries.
- 2 'Scandinavia' now refers to Norway, Sweden and Demark only.
- 3 Norway enacted census-based national suffrage for women in 1907 and universal female suffrage in 1913. However, the economic requirements were maintained also after this. In 1919, receivers of poor relief were included in the polity, regardless of gender. Local suffrage followed the same pattern: In 1901, women with income above a certain threshold – or with a husband earning the same amount annually – could vote and stand for local election. In 1910, this right was made universal for all self-sustained women above 25 years of age.
- 4 Archive after Fredrikke Marie Qvam, Private Archive No. 5, The University Library of NTNU, Special Collection, Trondheim, Norway, Box 22: Correspondence 1908.
- 5 See note 4 above.
- 6 Archive after Fredrikke Marie Qvam, Private Archive No. 5, The University Library of NTNU, Special Collection, Trondheim, Norway, Box 23: Correspondence 1909.
- 7 Archive after Fredrikke Marie Qvam, Private Archive No. 5, The University Library of NTNU, Special Collection, Trondheim, Norway, Box 56: The International Woman's Suffrage Alliance, Report from Norway read by Fru F. M. Qvam on the International Woman Suffrage Alliance London Conference.

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