

What is equal opportunity? Finding a shared answer would finally place under a sound perspective all the discussions on individual merit and responsibility, which for so many years have muddled the public debate without giving any contribution to improving social cohesion and development policies. So: is equal opportunity a principle genuinely underpinning the vision of those who talk about it? Is it a criteria on which to base redistributive policies? Or is it a rhetoric formula to cover up the decision not to implement any? It is widely acknowledged that boosting investment in preschool education and childcare benefits the entire community. Accessible preschool childcare for all means closing the opportunity gap generated by the social and cultural divide between families. It also means enriching human capital and, potentially, enhancing long-term growth. It is also the only genuine measure which will provide gender-balanced access to the labour market, and make equal pay for equal

work tangible and real. The interview with Maria Arnholm, the Swedish Minister for Gender Equality and Deputy Minister of Education, pulls back the veil on how to put words into practice. Preschool childcare is available to all Swedish children from the age of one; when children reach the age of 3 they are entitled to at least 525 hours per year free of charge. Each family spends between 1% and 3% of its monthly income on their children's education, depending on the number of children in the family: fees are directly proportional to the parents' income. Moreover, fathers are entitled to 60 days of mandatory parental leave. In contrast, ISTAT statistics about the labour market in Italy paint a different picture: in 2010, 30% of mothers stopped working to look after the family, while only 3% of fathers followed suit. For women born after 1973, leaving the workplace for family reasons is not a matter of choice, but involves coercion: the shame of signing an undated resignation letter before

beginning a job is not a thing of the past, but the new frontier of gender discrimination. We would cautiously advance the view that a Law imposing quotas for women in Executive Boards and a one-day parental leave for fathers can hardly be the right answer; that without a family policy that allows young people to combine work, care and family, it's useless to negotiate a multi-million package of EU funds to tackle youth unemployment; that hiding behind budgetary rules instead of investing in welfare is short-sighted because it dampens rather than boosting opportunities for growth; that it's not tax rates (higher in Sweden than Italy) that make the difference, but the quality of the services they finance; that stability and competitiveness can only leverage on social security and (real) equal opportunities, and not on pre-signed resignation letters.

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ARNHOLM

## STABILITY? ENFORCING EQUAL RIGHTS IS THE SAFEST WAY TO ACHIEVE IT.

“*I strongly believe that it must become possible to combine parenthood and career. Accessible childcare for all is a prerequisite. Our preschool system is heavily subsidised, but I do not see this as a cost, but as an investment in both our children and their parents.*”

**Telos:** Reducing the gender pay gap has been recognised by the European Commission as one of its top priorities. Besides that, a serious gap in labour market participation still persists throughout the EU. As a Minister of Gender Equality, how do you plan to take action to close the gender gap and which hurdles do you regard as the most challenging ones in the implementation of such a strategy?

**Maria Arnholm:** Today, the lifetime income of a man and the life income of a woman differs with on average €360,000. Imagine all the things you can buy and invest in with €360,000 – a new house, your children's education fees, financing your retirement. And this is of course related to how much you work.

I would like to point out three factors for why this is the case. The first factor is that women work part-time. I believe it should become easier for women to work full-time and we also need to ensure that they are not discriminated against on the labour market. Equal pay for equal work must be a basic principle. Here, I work together with employers and other stakeholders to raise awareness and exert pressure.

The second factor is that women take more responsibility for home and family. I strongly believe that it must become possible to combine parenthood and career. Accessible childcare for all is a prerequisite. Today, women take the majority of the parental leave and they work part time to take care of the children. This cannot go on. More men need to take greater responsibility for their children. One way of changing this is to strengthen the legislation regarding the parental leave.

The third factor is the gender segregated labour market. Men and women should be encouraged to break the stereotypes. We need male nurses and female fire-fighters. The reason for this is that you have a wage gap between traditionally male and female occupations. When we break the segregation I am convinced that the wage gap will shrink. However, this cannot be done with legislation - only by changing people's attitudes.

We are impressed by the high rate of 1-5 year old children attending preschool in Sweden. As a Deputy Minister for Education, could you tell us more about how the Swedish preschool system works, the principles on which it relies and how it is made affordable for families?

In Sweden, we have combined early childhood education and child care in what we call the *Educare* model.



**Maria Arnholm** is Minister for Gender Equality and Deputy Minister for Education in the Swedish Cabinet – having served in both the charges since January 2013. Her areas of responsibility include a wide range of topics, from gender equality to non-governmental organisations, from the pre-school system to financial support to students, and from youth policy to adult education. Prior to this, she held the charge of State Secretary to the Minister for Gender Equality. Her engagement in the youth organisation of the Swedish Liberal Party dates back to the late Seventies. She then served as Political Secretary of Bengt Westerberg, at the time leader of the Liberal Party and Member of the Swedish Parliament (*Riksdag*), and followed him as a Chief of Staff when Westerberg held the charge of Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Health and Social Affairs in the centre-right Cabinet headed by Carl Bildt (1991-1994). She went on undertaking a successful career in the private sector, holding the charges of, among others, Communications Director in the pan-Scandinavian retail chain Coop Norden AB in 2002-2006 and CEO of the public relations and communication firm Springtime in 2006-2012. In the same period (2004-2012) she was also Member of the Governing Board of the State-owned broadcasting company, Sveriges Television. Maria Arnholm studied Law at the University of Stockholm. Born in Gothenburg, Maria lives in Lidingö. She is married and has two adult sons.

The construction of the Swedish system really puts an emphasis on the availability of preschool and Municipalities are obliged to provide preschool for children from the age of one. This holds valid not only when parents are working or studying, but also when they are unemployed or on a leave of absence. In the latter cases, children are entitled to at least 3 hours per day or 15 hours every week. In addition to this, all children receive at least 525 hours per year free of charge, beginning from the Fall when the child reaches the age of 3.

Most preschools are open from 6:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. The current Government has also invested in providing preschool for children during nights, weekends and holidays. Many parents do not have the choice to work 9 to 5, and the preschool has to be able to cater to the needs of these families.

Fees are directly proportional to the parents' income and inversely proportional to the number of children in a family. The fee can be up to three per cent of a family's monthly income, but must never exceed 1,200 SEK (approx. €140) per month. This means that our preschool system is heavily subsidised, but I do not see this as a cost, but as an investment in both our children and their parents.

**In Italy and the EU, we are having a lively debate on how to tackle youth unemployment whose current levels, according to ECB President Draghi, are a threat to the *very fabric of society*. In the Swedish experience, can vocational training play a role in encouraging higher employment levels in the younger generations, by bridging the gap between the educational system and the business environment?**

I believe that vocational training plays a crucial role for bridging the aforementioned gap, but it also serves another purpose: stimulation. Many young people today dream about finishing school and finding a job but they fail in school. Vocational training is a great way for all those who do not find their stimulation in school but need to find a job.

When this Government came into power we restructured the school system to allow for a stronger focus on vocational training. During the social democratic Governments, the main focus was put on the theoretical part of the school system and not so much on vocational training. Consequently, there was a lot of work to be done.

Today, the Government has invited the social partners to tripartite talks on how we can make the labour market more inclusive and flexible. We see an urgent need to create more and broader paths into the labour market, but the Government cannot do this without the help of the unions and the employers. The result has so far been very positive and there are now introduction agreements by which young people without any relevant experience are offered supervision and training during part of their working day.

I also believe that it is important to remember that the importance of vocational training holds true also for people who no longer are new on the labour market. If we are to tackle the demographic challenges of tomorrow we need not only to focus on the young, but on the older.

**You are a member of the longest serving non-social democrat Swedish Cabinet in one century. How would you explain the success of the centre-right coalition? Could you outline its most significant achievements?**

In Sweden, the political climate has been very stable. The wicked say that the best social democrats win our elections. And even though I disagree with that statement, there is truth in it in the sense that the Swedes love stability. We love structure, knowing what we can expect and holding people accountable for their actions. The current Government has managed to take Sweden through one of the most severe economic crises in modern times. The Swedish people knows this and I would say that it is our biggest achievement. Of course, many challenges still lie ahead of us, but the Government has established itself as a reliable governing coalition and that's what matters most: reliability.