

# Where have all the women gone?

## Gender perspective on the Regional Growth Agreements – a new Swedish regional policy

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### Introduction

This article adopts a *gender perspective while focussing on the Swedish Regional Growth Agreements (RGA)*.<sup>1</sup> These agreements are looked upon by the Swedish Government as a central instrument in what is referred to as “a new regional policy”. Focus here will be mainly on two issues. Firstly, on the fact that Swedish regions have not succeeded in integrating a gender equality perspective into the Regional Growth Agreements, despite the declared intentions and expectations of the Government. Secondly, even though one of the stated purposes of “a new regional policy” is to bring in as partners groups and networks who have not previously had an influential role in regional development and growth issues the regions have scarcely succeeded in doing this.

The groups and networks that are focussed on here are the County Experts in Gender Equality and the Regional Resource Centres for Women. The empirical data is based mainly on 35 interviews with some 40 persons, which were conducted in each of Sweden’s 21 counties in the spring of 2000. Just why these particular groups and networks were chosen will be discussed later in the article.

### Structure of the article

The purpose of the Regional Growth Agreements is initially presented in brief. Thereafter, a number of key concepts within this new regional policy are introduced. It is here, with reference to earlier work, that the critique focussing on the lack of a gender perspective on regional policy and regional growth is introduced. After this the purpose of choosing to interview the particular groups and networks mentioned will be outlined. Following that, the empirical data is then presented in the context of five key organisational concepts. One of these con-

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the empirical data mentioned above, and is an abstract from an unpublished dissertation manuscript in Swedish, which I have written and presented at the Dept. of Economic History, Stockholm University and at the National Institute for Working Life (NIWL). For further reading see my future dissertation and also forthcoming publications at NIWL by Hanna Westberg, Ursula Hård and Lars Kronvall. The first RGA-period lasts between the years 1999-2003. During the second period the “agreements” are instead referred to as “programs” (RGP). As the first period is in focus in this article the word “agreements” is the used.

cepts is the strategy and working method used in the attempt to integrate a gender perspective, namely – gender mainstreaming. As this is an important factor it will be outlined quite thoroughly. Note should also be made here that the text about “gender mainstreaming”, is based on a number of national and international reports for brevity’s sake not mentioned in the reference list. The article ends with some concluding remarks.

## The Regional Growth Agreements

The Regional Growth Agreements are instruments in a new regional economic/commercial policy that the Swedish Government introduced in 1998. The goal is to stimulate the economic growth that can help enterprises to grow, thus increasing working opportunities for both women and men. One significant starting point with the agreements is that regional influence over economic policy is set to increase, and that the agreements are to take local and regional differences into consideration in relation to economic/commercial development. Responsibility and decisions are to be taken by those concerned locally and regionally, so that as many people as possible will be involved. The work should be looked upon as a thorough and long-lasting learning process. The Government emphasizes how important it is to bring forward *gender equality* (my italics) and environmental issues as driving forces for development and growth (Ds 2000:7, Tillväxt i hela Sverige).

It is important to note that an integrated gender equality perspective on the Regional Growth Agreements has been reinforced over time. Indeed it is stipulated that adoption of a gender equality perspective is a horizontal demand, in order for the Government to take part and give support. This means that gender equality when it comes to representation of the sexes by the 60/40-principle is to be taken into consideration, and that a gender perspective is also to be integrated into all parts of the Regional Growth Agreements. The goal here is to reach an equal distribution of power and influence between men and women. This demand has however not been met, even though some slight regional variations do exist.

## Key concepts for a new regional policy

Historically, the fact that the Government has initiated changes and has tried to stimulate and control development processes in a number of different ways is nothing new. What may be considered at least partly novel however is the way in which the Regional Growth Agreements are supposed to initiate *development processes in co-operation* within *broad developing coalitions and partnerships* which have responsibilities at both the regional and the local levels. In addition, the fact that a number of groups and networks previously without an influential

role in the regional development process now are to take part and are to contribute their expertise in this area is also a point of some note.

Researchers too have stressed how important co-operation between different actors is in terms of building strong partnerships and strategically developing coalitions as a base for learning and for meeting future changes. These partnerships and coalitions may consist of different kinds of companies, research associations and other types of institutions such as political ones and also different types of regional and local development groups and networks. Their tasks are then to maintain a continuous work programme of regional improvement by supporting different kinds of initiatives for change and development (Asheim 2000, Brulin/Westberg 2000, Gustavsen 2001).

In relation both to the different concepts outlined above and to the fact that “new” groups and networks are now to take part in the work of the Regional Growth Agreements, it is important to note here that in themselves, concepts can be ambiguous and are therefore important to analyse. Indeed, such questions have already been addressed by Ann Markusen (1999). She uses the concepts “social capital” and “networks” as examples, claiming that they are usually presented as general and positive, without their background and content being properly investigated. Markusen argues however that the motivation of the network participants together with the sustainability of the network must be researched. Furthermore, it is often vital in these matters to understand the ongoing nature of uneven power relations as well as knowing who is included or excluded within the network.

## Adopting a gender perspective on regional policy

The fact that concepts can be ambiguous has also been directly addressed within the discipline of feminist research. In Sweden a significant critique has been made of regional policy, both before and after the introduction of the Regional Growth Agreements, claiming that regional policy to a very large extent has not displayed a gender equality perspective.

Tora Friberg (1993) has studied regional development using a feminist perspective. In a publication produced by the Swedish National Rural Agency by order of the Government, she discusses women’s conditions and how these are to be expressed within regional policy. Friberg suggests that gender equality policy has to a large extent not been able to influence regional policy, even though this has been one of the stated objectives. She argues that concepts within research and policy are not gender neutral, even though they are often presented as such. Therefore it is important to talk about women and men and to critically study just exactly whose problems regional policy “solutions” are really trying to address. In effect Friberg argues that more often than not the various concepts used to

represent mankind are identical with those that society as a whole equates with the male of the species. As such, women are here looked upon as different and divergent from mankind.

In a report concerning gender allocations for quotas within regional policy in Sweden, Gunnel Forsberg (1999) sees the Regional Growth Agreements as a chance for women to become more “influential” in regional policy. If this is to happen however, she notes, the gender equality criteria need to have a more significant role in the concrete work of the Regional Growth Agreements. When regional policy is so drastically changing, it is important to discuss how gender equal regional policy can be united with the demands of robust and strong regions as well as with the overall goal of regional growth. One should thus always ask what “a strong region” exactly implies, where focusing only on economic factors can lead to strong growth not being built on a robust base. As such, it may be more important to talk about robust regions rather than growth regions. One condition of a robust region would be that a demographic structure exists with a good division between the ages and the sexes, and that the concept of infrastructure is broadened to include the social infrastructure such as the family, welfare and gender equality policy. Conducting a regional policy, which is gender equal, is thus to define what a gender perspective on growth means. This, Forsberg claims, is not to be understood as if men and women have different opinions about regional goals, but instead it relates to the need to understand that women accrue their proper share of the growth created.

### Why interview the County Experts in Gender Equality and the Regional Resource Centres for Women?

One of the important actors in respect of the Regional Growth Agreements has been the Swedish Business Development Agency (NUTEK), appointed by the Government to act as an instrument of national support to the different regions. Their remit has also included having a supportive function towards another important actor, namely, the County Administrative Board. These County Administrative Boards are situated in each of the 21 counties of Sweden, effectively functioning as the Government’s “right hand man” in the localities. Additionally they have also been given regional responsibility with regard to the Regional Growth Agreements.

In each of the 21 counties in Sweden the County Expert in Gender Equality was interviewed. These experts were, some years ago, appointed by the Government and their work place is situated in the offices of the County Administrative Board. They are tasked with having a supporting and active role both at the County Administrative Board and within the region as a whole. Given the fact that the Government has appointed them and that the Government gave

responsibility for the Regional Growth Agreements to the County Administrative Boards and also bearing in mind the horizontal demand that gender equality is to be integrated into the RGAs, one could assume that the person with special expertise within the gender equality area would have been invited to participate in the work of the Regional Growth Agreements.

Furthermore the person who is in charge of what is called the Regional Resource Centre for Women was interviewed. On a regional level these Centres are to be found in most counties, where the County Administrative Board have part responsibility for their being. There are also Local Resource Centres for Women, which have in part been the responsibility of the different municipalities within the counties. Due to time and cost limitations the persons in charge of these local Centres have not been interviewed. The Centres came about as part of a “bottom up” strategy to start with and thereafter the Government chose to appoint one national Centre. The National Resource Centre for Women, situated within NUTEK, existed as a project until the end of 1999, with their task being to support the Regional and Local Resource Centres for Women. In short these Centres are to work for equal opportunities for women and men within regional development. With this background one could have assumed that these Centers would have been invited to work with the Regional Growth Agreements.

Earlier studies, though, have shown that approximately 25 per cent of the people working with the Regional Growth Agreements were women and that the Regional as well as the Local Resource Centres for Women had great difficulty in becoming involved with the work of the Regional Growth Agreements, which was also the case for the County Experts in Gender Equality (Hård/Sjöstedt-Karlsson 1998, NUTEK, NRC). This led the National Resource Centre for Women to assign Lillemor Westerberg (2000) to investigate this issue further. In short, her report showed that out of the 19 women she had interviewed at the Regional and Local Resource Centres for Women all except one had to initiate contact in order to become involved with the work of the Regional Growth Agreements. In other words, none were asked or initially invited.

The expertise as regards gender equality issues and the purpose of the work that the County Experts in Gender Equality, as well as those in the Resource Centres for Women do within the counties and regions is then sufficient reason as to why these groups and networks were chosen for interview. In order to also illicit the points of views of the people responsible for the final wordings of the various Regional Growth Agreements, interviews with some of the administrative officials at the County Administrative Boards were also undertaken.

## Investing the empirical data from the 21 counties

Below we see some of the possible reasons forwarded by the County Experts in Gender Equality and the Regional Resource Centres for Women, as to why very few women have taken part and why they themselves have had great difficulties in getting involved with the work of the Regional Growth Agreements, and why a gender perspective has not been integrated into the Regional Growth Agreements.

### Bottom-up and top down?

The quotation below shows that gender equality issues initially seem not to have been brought forward by governmental officials. It also states, which quite a few of those interviewed have confirmed, that the subject of gender equality was first brought up at a network meeting of the County Experts in Gender Equality. Within regional policy more generally it is often stressed how important a “bottom-up” perspective is in order to firmly establish the issues and to encourage wider involvement from the participants. A “bottom-up” perspective also seems to have been the case here. But despite this fact it has been noted by the majority of those interviewed, that it is the clarity of the Government directive, and its reoccurring nature that gives gender equality its legitimacy. Both “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches then seem to be needed when it comes to gender equality issues. This is discussed below.

When the Ministry of Industry first talked about the Regional Growth Agreements they did not mention gender equality at all. We brought it up at one of our national network meetings for the County Experts in Gender Equality. I think we brought it up to start with and discussed it with representatives of the Ministry of Industry. But then later the directive came from the Government, that gender equality was to be integrated into the Regional Growth Agreements. The directive made the demands clear for the people involved. If the demand had not been in the directive it would not have been brought up at all. The legitimacy comes from above. So when the Government says that now you are to work with gender equality, at least one tries.

### Partnership

A central aspect of the agreements has been that the work should be done in partnerships, where actors who not previously have had an influential role in regional policy should have an important part to play. Despite this intention in most of the counties, the so-called traditional actors have been predominant, and thus in effect they have designed the agreements mainly with regard to their own

interests. As such, so-called non-traditional groups, such as for instance the Resource Centres for Women, have had a very difficult time “getting in”. While on the rare occasions when they have gained access they have still not had much influence because only groups that undertook a significant financial commitment were allowed to sign the agreements. As the above-mentioned organisations do not have access to large amounts of economical resources, they have thus not been able to contribute and therefore they were not eligible to sign the agreements. This is looked upon by many of the interviewed as a significant democratic problem, concerning the effective control of who is actually allowed to participate in and influence regional development work. The politicians moreover it is claimed are simply not interested in such issues. Thus even if there is some level of positivity expressed concerning the fact that one tries new ways and that everyone is supposedly equal, the reality is that this has still not changed the fact that new groups have seldom been part of what the interviewed referred to as the “small partnership”, where the actual and final work was done. Rather, “new” groups participated mostly in what has been referred to as the “large partnership”, which had a mainly advisory role. It is in this latter “group” where most of the women who participated actually took part. How this is looked upon is expressed below.

It’s positive that one seeks new ways, new collaborative possibilities and that one makes use of development possibilities. But resources should be made available. There are new organisations, which highlight issues. Everybody is looked upon as equal, so in that sense it is new. But even if more people have participated than usual, quite a few have participated outside the “real” partnership, though. And even if quite a few were invited, only the ones who contributed with means were allowed to sign the agreements. It is a democratic problem – who has status and responsibility. But the politicians are not interested in this aspect.

## Gender representation

As noted above, women represent approximately 25 per cent of those working with the RGAs; in spite of the Government demand that there be at least an equal gender representation on the basis of the 60/40-principle. In some counties the invitations sent out by the County Administrative Boards demanded that the organisations contacted were to send one woman and one man. On numerous occasions however these demands were simply ignored. Another familiar occurrence was that a man would be appointed as the permanent representative with a woman as his deputy, with the permanent representative being sent to every meeting. Moreover, on numerous occasions it was suggested by the organisations in question that they simply did not have any competent women. But when the

County Administrative Board stood by its demand, mainly in the counties where the County Governor was deeply involved in gender equality work, the different organisations were then able to find competent women to represent their organisations. Another reason why men, to a much larger extent, were represented had to do with the fact that it has mainly been men who have held leading positions in the relevant areas. The work with the Regional Growth Agreements thereby mirrors Swedish society in this respect, particularly within the private sector but also within the public sector, with extremely few women at the top. How this is interpreted is illustrated below.

Well, you get a feeling sometimes that there are always some people who are there because they should be, but nothing much happens. But this is how it is with this “old-mans attitude” in many of the municipalities. They have been there for so long so they believe that they are to fix everything here. It is very traditional, maybe especially in industrial communities and in rural areas. When men keep women out like that, we don’t get the development that we need. Everything is supposed to be the same, no changes. But in the municipalities it is a lot about local development and by that it is a lot about women. They often get involved and work with different kinds of projects. And we need new ideas in order to get people to move here and to make them want to stay. We need structures so both women and men want to live in our areas.

## The direction of the Regional Growth Agreements

Another explanation as to why women have had difficulty in getting involved in the work of the RGAs might be found in the direction of the Agreements themselves, where commerce has been in focus. In many counties historical development has produced what we in Sweden would today call “male dominated areas” and where male structures are strong if not predominant. This has led to a continued focus on already established traditional manufacturing industries. As trade and industry have been the predominant focus of the Regional Growth Agreements, the public sector, including for instance the health and care sector, where women predominate, has not been included and has not been seen as “important for growth”. In other words, it is crucial to see what has been defined as “growth”, as well as to see how “growth” takes place, and for whom. Some of this is made clear in the quotation below.

One has defined growth as something that only emanates from companies and therefore the public sector has not been seen as an important actor. This way of defining growth has to change completely. Also one doesn’t think of the embryos for trade, for instance, that is build up by associations. It is my experience that many people who are engaged in associations start slowly with different kinds of small scaled enterprising but eventually, within a few



years, we do not know whether some of these ideas that come from associations actually become companies. I am thinking in particular about areas that women are often interested in, such as culture, tourism and health care. But today the agreements originate from already existing companies, thus there is a lot about manufacturing companies, which is a very male-dominated line of business.

## Gender mainstreaming

Last, but not least, the strategy and working method – gender mainstreaming – is another important factor to consider when gender equality is to be integrated into the policy of the Regional Growth Agreements. The concept “gender mainstreaming” originates from the third World Conference for Women in Nairobi 1985. It was explicitly introduced at the UN’s fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing 1995 and within the EU the concept was formalised in the Amsterdam treaty of 1997. Within the EU the concept has been launched as a new political strategy in order to achieve gender equality between men and women (in Swedish a word already exists which defines the concept of gender equality – “genus/köns jämlikhet” – namely *jämställdhet*). Gender mainstreaming is predominantly viewed as a means to end, or as the tool to reach the goal, which is gender equality. The concept is used to describe a strategic way of working, which implies that issues are moved from a “side track” position to instead become part of the organisation’s mainstream.

One important aspect of gender mainstreaming is the risks involved in using the tool. Ministry officials suggest indeed that gender mainstreaming can be misunderstood, especially in relation to specific gender equality work. Different interpretations of the concept may lead to the strategy itself being looked upon as the goal, instead of merely the tool used to reach the goal, which is gender equality. If gender mainstreaming is not correctly understood it can be looked upon as a replacement for specific gender equality work. As such, governments could use it as an excuse to replace the specific gender equality work (such as different kinds of gender specific projects for both men and women). Instead the Ministry suggests that gender mainstreaming demands a continuity of specific gender equality work. Not least to make sure that gender equality issues do not get excluded and that gender equality policy does not become too fragmented. The fact that gender mainstreaming *together* with specific gender equality work is being made into a parallel strategy has quite often been lost within both the EU and Sweden. But within the EU a clearer change has occurred, where the parallel strategy is highlighted. Similar indications have of late also been seen in Sweden, where for instance the Minister of Gender Equality has emphasised the importance of such a parallel strategy.

From the *interviews* it was clear that the majority had mixed feelings about gender mainstreaming. They all said that in the long run this was the right way to work in order to achieve lasting gender equality. But at the same time most of them were afraid that gender equality issues would be “integrated away”, and thus that the issues would disappear all together. The risk was increased by the fact that gender equality is not looked upon as an area with status or as a knowledge area in itself, in sharp contrast to the other horizontal demand – the environment. Instead gender equality issues it was felt are often seen as something that each person can have an “opinion” on, such as for instance over the work within the partnership or within the County Administrative Board. Quite often then the interviewed’s expertise was looked upon as simply “not needed”. In the interviews though, the importance of adopting parallel strategies until knowledge of gender equality had become engrained was emphasized together with the importance of having access to a sufficient level of funding to work with these parallel strategies. This is expressed below.

It is the new “buzz”-word. In every context. There is a big risk that many people are going to add a few appropriate sentences about gender equality in their project applications and that is enough to get EU-funding. But it does not mean anything. It is the “confession of the lips”. Therefore special gender equality projects are also needed. In some contexts the word gender mainstreaming is an alias. It is easy to write, “we intend to mainstream”. The risk is that when one says that now we have mainstreamed gender equality in this organisation one really says that now we don’t have to work with these issues, they are not important because we have mainstreamed. The gender equality issues disappear. Instead in the future work with the agreements it is important to spread knowledge and help one another to find good methods and have gender divided statistics. Also one has to have a gender equality perspective in the evaluations and one must follow up with gender equality money.

## Concluding remarks

This article has sought to discuss why, in spite of the Government’s stated intentions, the new system of Swedish regional growth politics – the Regional Growth Agreements – has not been successful in integrating a gender perspective, nor in bringing into the process groups and networks that have previously not had an influential part to play as regards regional development. Focus has been put on the County Experts in Gender Equality and the Regional Resource Centres for Women. Interviews were held in each of the 21 counties (35 interviews with all together some 40 people). These groups were chosen for interview because of their expertise within the knowledge area of gender equality, and their work in respect of equal opportunities for women and men

within regional development. As such, together with that they have been appointed by Government, one could have expected that such knowledge had been an asset within the work of the RGAs and therefore made use of. In order also to obtain information from the people who were responsible for the final wordings of the Regional Growth Agreements, a number of administrative officials at the County Administrative Board level were also interviewed.

There are a number of possible explanations both agent/individual and structural, as to why the County Experts in Gender Equality and those in the Regional Resource Centres for Women have expressed difficulty gaining acceptance as regards working with the Regional Growth Agreements is concerned, why women as a whole have not been well represented, and also the continuing lack of an integrated gender equality perspective within the Regional Growth Agreements, despite initially stated intentions.

It has been of great importance how clearly the demand for gender equality was expressed in the invitations/directives and how well the Government has been able to hold onto and reinforce these demands. When it comes to gender equality issues, legitimacy obviously comes “from above”, especially from the national level. As such, it seems to be the case that not just “bottom-up” but also “top-down” approaches are needed. Moreover, the fact that the public sector, where women predominate, has not been included in the growth calculations is another explanation. Additionally growth has been defined as emanating mainly from the so-called “male dominated industries”, such as for instance the manufacturing industries, rather than for instance tourism and health care related areas where again women predominate.

The fact that women, being half of the population, to a large extent have not been involved in the work of the Regional Growth Agreements is also a democratic problem. Even though some groups, often with limited financial resources, were formally invited to participate, they often had little ability to really influence the work. Firstly, most of the meetings took place during normal business hours. As the people who run the Regional Resource Centre for Women however earn their main income from elsewhere, not seldom their own businesses, they were seldom able to participate to any great extent. This should be compared to the greater possibilities afforded to civil servants, generally speaking, and even to the representatives of trade and industry, as well as to employees within larger private companies. Another reason as to why few women were involved in the work of the Regional Growth Agreements, was that organisations allegedly lacked the capability to internally identify competent women, except where women, very rarely, held leading positions

That all this is a democratic problem becomes even clearer when only the groups and networks that contributed with financing were allowed to sign the agreements, and thus able to influence the actual work. This had further impli-

cations for the groups who had few financial assets. Thus in consequence their ability to participate and contribute with their knowledge and experience in terms of regional development was restricted even more. Which groups and networks are included or excluded, and how this is done thus becomes fundamentally important. As such it is plain to see that the different groups and networks obviously have a varying degree of power and influence.

In addition, the strategy and working method used, namely – gender mainstreaming – became an important factor, and in particular how it was used, which leads up to another possible explanation for the poor results of the process as a whole. As gender equality issues are to be moved from the “side track” to the mainstream, regular staff members are then supposed to work with these issues. Many partnerships and County Administrative Boards then, however, simply felt that the expertise of the County Experts in Gender Equality was simply not needed. In contrast, the interviewed stressed how important it is to look upon gender equality as an area of expertise and also that in future “knowledge is spread” within the organisations and within the work with Regional Growth Agreements. Parallel strategies then seem to be needed, at least until gender equality, as with environmental issues, is seen as an area of expertise in its own right.

## The challenge of achieving sustainable regional growth and sustainable social communities

The discussion has drawn attention to a number of possible consequences when, generally speaking, half the population, in this case, women, have to a large extent been excluded from the work of “the new regional policy” – the Regional Growth Agreements. As such, women’s ability to define and influence social and regional growth in different regions has been severely restricted. *One of the main ways of facing up to the challenge of achieving sustainable regional growth and sustainable social communities* is thus to include both women and men in all future regional development work.

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## Interviews

35 interviews with 40 persons in each of Sweden's 21 counties conducted by Ursula Hård in spring year 2000:

- The County Expert in Gender Equality at the County Administrative Board.
- Regional Resource Centres for Women.
- Administrative Officials at the County Administrative Boards.

