

**Fifty years of
Nordic cooperation
on gender equality**

1974–2024

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This publication is also available online in a web-accessible version at:
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Introduction

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Nordic Council of Ministers' decision to establish official co-operation between the Nordic governments on gender equality issues. The forms of Nordic co-operation have evolved and changed over the last half-century, and since 2020 the remit has expanded to include LGBTI rights. Today, the region is united around a broad political platform aimed at improving gender equality and achieving equal rights and opportunities for all.

To make wise choices for the future, it is important to know the history that many of us are building on. That is why Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK), the co-operation body of the Nordic ministers for gender equality, has produced this anniversary publication. We have interviewed eight people with different backgrounds and knowledge and asked them to reflect on the years that have passed and to look ahead.

"What has happened over the last 50 years? What was the situation in 1974, have any specific events occurred since then that have had special significance and what can be said about Nordic co-operation and its importance for gender equality work in the Nordic region?"

The publication does not claim to be comprehensive; it provides some insights into historical events through individuals sharing their knowledge, experience and personal reflections. The interviews focus on themes such as family and welfare policies, sexual and reproductive health and rights, the development of gender equality policies and the rights of LGBTI people.

Over the last 50 years, the hard work of civil society and political activists has made the Nordic Region one of the most gender-equal regions in the world. But we cannot rest on our laurels, and our successes so far must be defended. Although gender equality has been prioritised in the Nordic Region, there are still clear differences in the conditions for women, men and LGBTI people in the Nordic Region. For example, the Nordic countries struggle with both vertically and horizontally gender-segregated labour markets, LGBTI people are subjected to abuse, threats and violence to a greater extent than others and there is still a significant pay gap between women and men.

This is why Nordic co-operation on gender equality and LGBTI issues continues. Next year, a new co-operation programme for the 2025-2030 period will come into force, covering issues such as the gender-segregated labour market, stereotypical norms related to gender, gender identity and sexuality, and gender equality challenges in relation to the green transition.

We hope that this anniversary publication will give those working in the field an opportunity to reflect on the past and feel proud of the progress that has been made so far, but also to inspire the will and vigour needed to tackle current and future challenges.

Nordic co-operation

Official Nordic co-operation takes place within the framework of the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council and includes Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, as well as the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. In 1974, the Nordic Council of Ministers decided that all Nordic governments would appoint someone to liaise with the other Nordic governments on gender equality issues. A few years later, an action programme for Nordic co-operation on gender equality issues was drawn up and a committee of officials was established. In 2020, this co-operation was extended to include the rights of LGBTI people.

[Read more about Nordic co-operation on gender equality and LGBTI issues](#)

Key dates in the official Nordic co-operation on gender equality

In December 1974, the Nordic Council of Ministers decided that all Nordic governments should appoint a contact person to liaise with the administrations of the other governments on gender equality issues. This is seen as the start of Nordic co-operation on gender equality.

Below you will find important dates and a brief summary of priority themes for Nordic gender equality co-operation.

1974

In December 1974, the Nordic Council of Ministers decided that all Nordic governments should appoint a contact person to liaise with the administrations of the other governments on gender equality issues.

1975

A Nordic contact group for gender equality issues is set up and the first contact group meeting is held in April 1975.

1978

A meeting between the Nordic Council Committee for Social Affairs and the Environment and the Ministers for Co-operation on the Nordic Council of Ministers approves the action plan for Nordic co-operation on gender equality issues. At the meeting, it is proposed that an official committee for gender equality issues (ÄK-JÄM) be established.

1980

The Ministers for Gender Equality take over responsibility for Nordic co-operation on gender equality.

1981

A counsellor working on gender equality as a main field of work is employed at the Secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

1982

The first co-operation programme for Nordic gender equality work is approved by the Nordic Council of Ministers for Gender Equality (MR-JÄM).

1988

MR-JÄM approves the second co-operation programme for Nordic gender equality work 1989-1993

Priority themes:

- The role of women in economic development
- Reconciling family and working life for women and men

1995

MR-JÄM approves the third co-operation programme for Nordic gender equality work 1995-2000.

Priority themes:

- Promoting equal access of women and men to political and economic decision-making processes
- Promoting the economic equality and empowerment of women and men
- Promoting a gender equal working life
- Improving the reconciliation of parenting and work for both women and men
- Influencing European and international developments in the field of gender equality

Nordiska institutet för kvinno- och könsforskning (The Nordic Institute for Women's and Gender Research, NIKK) is founded and located at the University of Oslo.

2000

The Nordic Council of Ministers decides on the responsibility of all sectors for gender mainstreaming.

MR-JÄM approves the fourth co-operation programme for Nordic gender equality work 2001-2005.

Priority themes:

- Mainstreaming a gender perspective in Nordic government budgets
- Men and gender equality
- Violence against women

2004

An anniversary seminar – 30 years of Nordic gender equality co-operation – is organised in Reykjavik.

2006

MR-JÄM approves the fifth co-operation programme for Nordic gender equality work 2006-2010.

Priority themes:

- Gender and power
- Gender and young people

2010

The sixth four-year programme for Nordic co-operation on gender equality 2011-2014 is drawn up under the Danish Presidency.

Priority themes:

- Training and education
- Labour market
- Ethnicity
- Violence

2011

Nordiska institutet för kvinno- och könsforskning (The Nordic Institute for Women's and Gender Research, NIKK) ceases operations in connection with its reconfiguration into a Nordic co-operation body.

2012

The co-operation body Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK) is located at the University of Gothenburg following a tender process in the Nordic region.

2013

A Nordic fund for gender equality activities is established and the first call for project funding is issued.

2014

The 40th anniversary of Nordic co-operation on gender equality policy is celebrated at the Nordic Forum in Malmö in June and at a conference in Reykjavik in August.

2015

The seventh co-operation programme enters into force. It includes the following priorities:

- Public spaces
- Welfare and innovation

2019

The eighth gender equality co-operation programme is adopted for the period 2019-2022. The priority themes are:

- The future of work and growth
- Welfare, health and quality of life
- Power and influence
- Gender equality work with a focus on men and masculinity

The programme is extended until 2024 and was expanded in 2020 when Nordic co-operation was extended to include LGBTI rights and opportunities in the Nordic region.

2020

In January, Nordic co-operation is expanded to include co-operation on equal rights and opportunities for LGBTI people in the Nordic Region. The work is led by the Nordic ministers for gender equality, who make up the Nordic Council of Ministers for Gender Equality and LGBTI.

2021

A Nordic LGBTI fund is launched to stimulate Nordic co-operation on LGBTI issues. The first call for proposals will be issued in September.

2024

Preparation of a co-operation programme for gender equality and LGBTI 2025-2030 begins under the Swedish Presidency.

A photograph of a man with glasses and a red sweater holding a young child in a kitchen. The man is looking down at the child, who is looking at a sink. The text is overlaid on the image.

"Gender equality and family policy have become an important part of our Nordic identity, and something that distinguishes us internationally"

Anne Lise Ellingsaeter

From maternity insurance to shared parental leave

Generous parental insurance and the right to childcare are two of the gender equality reforms that have contributed to Nordic women being among the most active in the world in terms of labour market participation. In 1974, the same year that Nordic co-operation on gender equality policy began, Sweden became the first country in the world to introduce universal parental insurance, allowing not only mothers but also fathers to stay at home when their children are young. Anne Lise Ellingsæter, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Oslo, talks about the changes in family policy in the 1970s.



Anne Lise Ellingsæter,
professor emerita of sociology at the University of Oslo (Press image copyright, University of Oslo)

"The decision shows that the role of fathers is changing. Providing the opportunity for fathers to stay at home is an expression of a new way of looking at fathers," says Anne Lise Ellingsæter.

She is currently working on the book *Nordic Earner-Carer Politics: A Comparative and Historical Analysis*, which tells the story of family policy in the Nordic countries over the past 50 years.

"It was in the 1970s that most of the seeds were sown for the model we have today, which is based on the idea that women and men should share the responsibility for earning a living and caring for children and the home," says Anne Lise Ellingsæter.

She was a student when the Nordic countries began co-operating on gender equality issues in 1974, graduating soon after with a degree in sociology.

"In my thesis, I interviewed housewives who spoke of loneliness and boredom."

It was not obvious that she would continue in academia as a researcher, but now, as of 2024, she has been researching family policy and gender equality for over 30 years.

In addition to the introduction of universal parental insurance, Anne Lise Ellingsæter believes that the decision to expand publicly funded childcare has had a major impact on women's opportunities to work and pursue a career.

"The reforms in these two areas are at the heart of Nordic family policy," she says.

Although mothers still take a larger share of parental leave than fathers, she says the change that has taken place over the past 50 years is profound. She notes that there is now a near consensus on many of the family policy issues that were the subject of heated debate in the 1970s.

"For example, there was concern that childcare could have a negative impact on children. Many argued that it could be harmful for children to be away from their parents, spending several hours a day at an institution. Such arguments persisted even after the 1970s, especially in Norway and Finland, but we rarely hear them today. There are no

Conflicts over family policy

There are several examples over the years where political conflicts have flared up around family policy.

In Norway, for example, there was disagreement between different political blocs over 'fatherhood months' that culminated after the 2013 election. In 2014, the newly elected centre-right government reduced the earmarked weeks from 14 to 10. However, in 2018, the number of weeks was increased again.

In Sweden, conflicts over family policy have been particularly visible in the controversy surrounding the childcare allowance, which can be claimed by parents who do not use childcare facilities. First introduced in 1994 by a centre-right government, it was abolished the same year by the Social Democrats, following a change of government. It was then reintroduced by a centre-right government in 2008, only to be abolished again in 2016. In Norway, childcare allowance has also become a bone of contention between political blocs, whereas in Finland, for example, it is less controversial. The main argument in favour of childcare allowance is that it gives parents greater freedom of choice. The main argument against it is that it has a lock-in effect for women.

parliamentary parties that represent such a position, on the contrary, the attitude is that preschool is a positive influence and beneficial for children's development. I would say that support for public childcare is quite strong in all the Nordic countries."

Compared to the rest of the world, women in the Nordic countries were early entrants to the labour market. "It is sometimes said that it was political reforms that steered women in the Nordic countries into the labour market, but this was not the case," emphasises Anne Lise Ellingsæter. "On the contrary, the reforms came about as a result of pressure from the women's movement, many of whom saw professional work as an opportunity for economic independence."

"It was not that the state told women to enter the labour market, but that women *wanted* to work. The welfare model and family policies that we have here in the Nordic countries have emerged through interaction between social change and supporting political reforms."

In the 1970s, Nordic family policy had a clear gender equality focus, but over the years, Anne Lise Ellingsæter recognises that this emphasis has partly changed.

"Fifty years ago, people talked about how the reforms would increase opportunities for women. Now we talk more about the needs of children instead."

She asserts, as an example, that nowadays we do not primarily think that fathers should take more responsibility at home so that women can work on the same terms as men, but because children need the presence and care of their parents.

Over the years, the debate on the role of fathers has shifted from men's fitness to care for young children to the importance of fathers taking on this role.

The view of childcare has also increasingly focussed on the needs of children and taken on a clearer educational focus.

"It is no longer seen primarily as a place where children are looked after so that parents can work, but as an environment that contributes to children's development."

The change in the perception of the role of fathers, and the stronger emphasis on the importance of fathers as carers, is reflected in family policies through the introduction of so-called 'father's months'. To encourage more fathers to take responsibility at home, the Nordic countries have gradually earmarked an increasing amount of parental leave for each parent, albeit to different extents and at different rates.

Anne Lise Ellingsæter describes this as a gradual change in the view of men's and women's roles in working life and at home, but the development has not always been smooth and the issues have created conflicts. For example, proposals to introduce paternity leave have in many cases become a bone of contention between the political blocs, with social democrats, left-wing parties and to some extent liberals on one side and right-wing parties on the other.

"The battle has often been between the two core values of 'gender equality' and 'freedom of choice'."

Anne Lise Ellingsæter says that Sweden has often acted as a driving force in the development of Nordic family policy. Sweden has usually been the first to implement reforms, but there are occasions when other Nordic countries have taken the lead. Norway, for example, was the first to earmark part of parental leave for each parent in 1993.

Looking at the last two decades, it is Iceland in particular that stands out. Although it was the last Nordic country to earmark parental days, it introduced the most radical parental leave model in the Nordic countries from a gender equality perspective. Since 2021, each parent has been entitled to six months of parental leave, of which a maximum of six weeks can be transferred to the other parent.

"I think the introduction of shared parental leave in Iceland shows that there can be advantages in not being the first to introduce a reform. When you have good examples to point to, you can get public opinion on your side to implement major changes in one step," says Anne Lise Ellingsæter.

She adds that there have also recently been extensive reforms in parental insurance to increase fathers' rights in Finland and Denmark.

"This has helped to consolidate the common Nordic family policy profile."

Since the 1970s, many new issues have emerged in family policy, such as LGBTI people's opportunities to start a family and the right of single people to access assisted fertility. Anne Lise Ellingsæter feels that, as things stand, the Nordic countries are more closely aligned on family policy than ever before. She describes Nordic co-operation in the area of gender equality as 'very strong', and highlights how the countries have pushed each other over the years.

"Gender equality and family policy have become an important part of our Nordic identity, and something that distinguishes us internationally."

She believes there is reason to stop and look at the changes that have taken place over the past 50 years.

"It's a completely different world. There has been huge societal change, of which family policy is an important part."

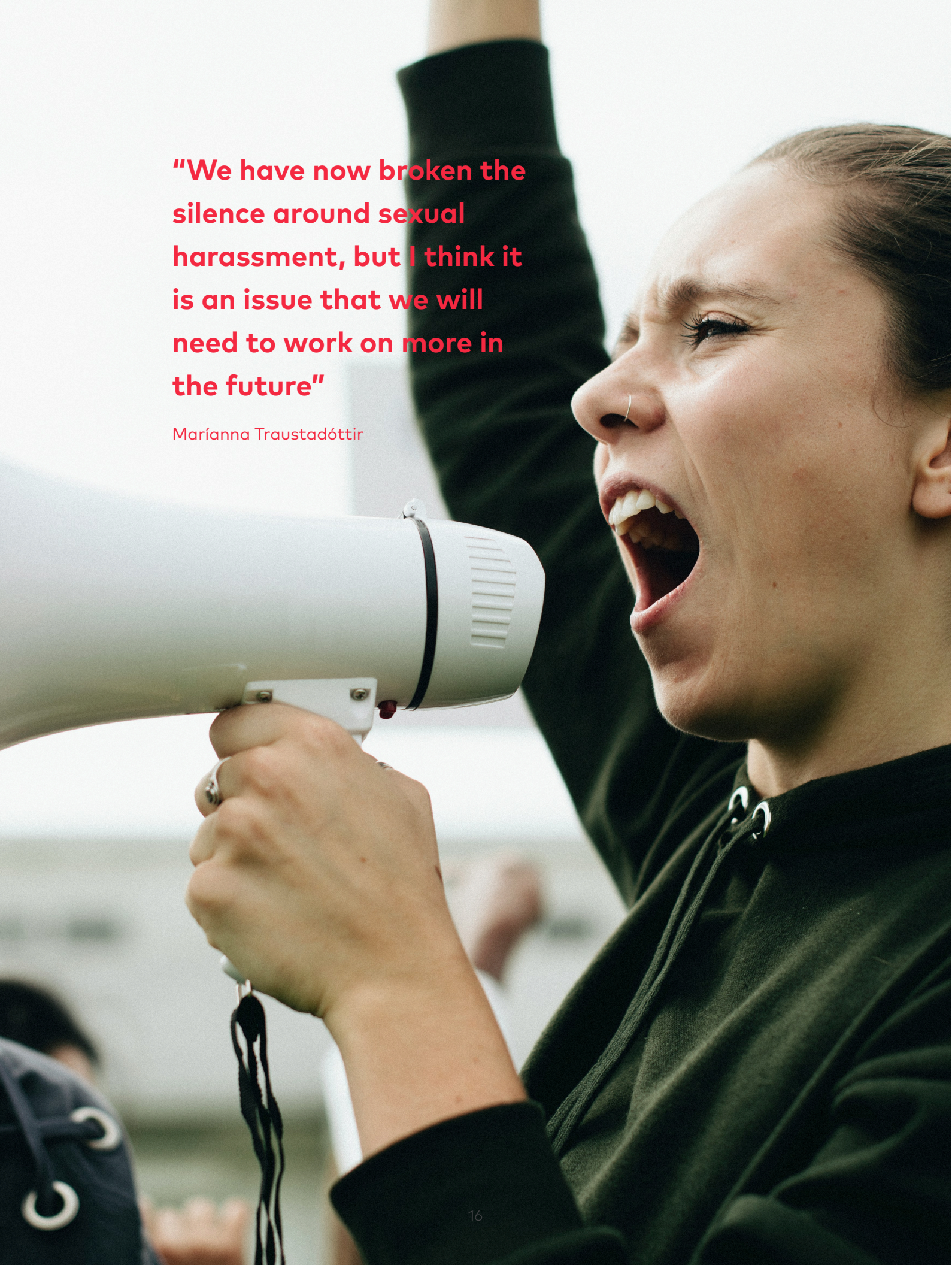
One of the challenges facing the Nordic countries in the future is the falling birth rate, which is creating a demographic imbalance. An ever smaller group of young people will have to support and care for a relatively large group of older people. Anne Lise Ellingsæter believes that in the future we may see family policy initiatives aimed at increasing the birth rate.

She sees that improvements in childcare and parental insurance can make life easier for families and perhaps in some sense lead to slightly more children being born, but she is nevertheless sceptical about whether it is possible to control the number of births through policy.

"There are many reasons why we choose to have children or not. It is not so easy to control with individual political reforms."

She goes on to say that it is necessary to ask whether the state should really have the explicit goal of trying to influence people to produce more children.

"Such a policy means that the state is reaching far into the private and personal sphere. It also implies an instrumental view of children and increased pressure on the reproductive role of women. If policy takes this direction, it would represent a reversal of Nordic family policy, which has centred on the welfare of families with children rather than population."

A close-up, profile shot of a young woman with light brown hair tied back, wearing a dark green hoodie. She is shouting with her mouth wide open into a white megaphone held in her right hand. Her right arm is raised in the background. The background is blurred, showing other people and what appears to be an outdoor setting.

**"We have now broken the
silence around sexual
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need to work on more in
the future"**

Marianna Traustadóttir

The women's strike started the third wave of feminism in Iceland

The 1970s were characterised by peace and freedom movements around the world. In the Nordic countries, the women's movement gathered pace and several major gender equality reforms were implemented. In 1975, Iceland organised the largest strike in support of women's rights in Nordic history. Marianna Traustadóttir, a long-time gender equality expert, explains the origins of the historic strike and what came in its wake.



Marianna Traustadóttir,
Iceland's Workers' Union

On 24 October 1975, Icelandic women went on strike: 25,000 stayed home from work and gave up all domestic work in protest against unfair wages and poor working conditions. The protest was supported by women of all ages and from all walks of life, and the demonstration in the centre of Reykjavik is considered one of the largest in the country's history.

Marianna Traustadóttir has worked as a gender equality expert in the Icelandic trade union movement for over 20 years, and describes the strike as the start of third-wave feminism in Iceland.

"The feeling was that enough was enough. The strike was a way to recognise all the important work that women were doing," she says.

She describes how Iceland underwent rapid modernisation after the Second World War. Houses were renovated, factories were built and more women entered the labour market. Many women in the other Nordic countries also entered the labour market during this period, but women's work was valued less than men's, which was reflected in their wages. Women's opportunities to work were also limited throughout the Nordic region by poor childcare provisions.

The organisation *Rödstrumporna* (Red Stockings) initiated the 1975 strike in Reykjavik, but the protest was supported by a range of actors including the trade union movement and some political parties. To mobilise as many people as possible, the broad group of organisers decided not to refer to the event as a 'strike' but rather *Women's Day Off*. Among many, especially men, who were

faced with doing the housework and taking their children to work, the day was instead known as *Long Friday*.

Marianna Traustadóttir describes the breadth of participants as crucial to the impact of the strike.

"Although there were clearly differences of opinion on specific issues, it became clear that there was also a broad consensus, which created a sense of community and power. It felt

The #metoo movement in the Nordic countries

The #metoo movement began in the United States and spread internationally in 2017. In the Nordic countries, the movement had a strong impact and initiated a broad debate on sexual harassment. In several of the Nordic countries, the focus was on harassment in the workplace, but the movement also highlighted victimisation in other areas of society, such as bars and relationships.

In Sweden, the #metoo movement brought together women from a wide range of industries. Women from many areas spoke out, including actors, lawyers, doctors, employees in the restaurant and construction industries and members of the armed forces, among others.

In Iceland, women with migrant backgrounds published their own manifesto and it became clear that the harassment they faced was rooted in both sexism and racism.

In Finland, the #metoo movement helped push forward a bill on consent. Parliament passed the law in 2022.

like we could achieve anything, and in that way the strike became important not only in the fight for better working conditions but as a springboard for the whole feminist movement."

Marianna Traustadóttir was a student in France during the 1975 strike, so she was not on the streets of Reykjavik. However, when *Women's Day Off* was organised for the second time in 1985, she was back in Iceland. Over the years, she has helped organise new *Women's Day Off* events in her role as a gender equality expert at the trade union ASÍ Iceland, and she has now also participated as a retiree.

In total, *Women's Day Off* has been organised seven times: 1975, 1985, 2005, 2010, 2016, 2018 and 2023.

"It is not an annual or regular event, but we have come together when there has been an important topic that needs attention," says Marianna Traustadóttir.

In 2018, *Women's Day Off* focused specifically on sexual harassment in the workplace, as part of the #MeToo movement. This issue was also highlighted in 2023, as one of the biggest challenges for women in the world of work.

"We have now broken the silence around sexual harassment, but I think it is an issue that we will need to work on more in the future," says Marianna Traustadóttir.

Looking ahead, she also sees a need to pursue gender equality work with a broader equality perspective, and to highlight the situation of particularly vulnerable groups.

"The labour market has changed a lot since the 1970s, and we have a growing problem with trafficking, for example. Some people are lured here with job promises that are not fulfilled, and are forced to work in poor conditions. I think this should be included in gender equality work."

During some of the *Women's Day Off* events in Iceland, protests have started in the early afternoon, with women encouraged to leave work before the end of the working day. Organisers have pointed to the pay gap and argued that women are not paid for a full working day. In 2023, for the first time since 1975, women were encouraged to stay at home all day, in protest against the persistent pay gap. The gender pay gap is slowly closing in Iceland as well as the other Nordic countries. According to Marianna Traustadóttir, progress has been particularly positive in achieving equal pay for equal work. The idea is that women and men should be paid the same if they work in the same job and have the same education and experience.

"The problem is that women and men often work in different industries, and industries in which many women work pay lower wages," says Marianna Traustadóttir.

She recognises the need for new initiatives to reduce the pay gap between jobs of equal value. In Iceland, political efforts have been made to bring about such change through the introduction of an 'equal pay standard'. Since 2018, all employers with more than 25 employees are required by law to conduct structured salary reviews and ensure that there are no unjustified differences in pay between employees whose roles have equivalent requirements in terms of, for example, responsibilities and training.

"It has opened up conversations about wages and why there is such a difference between jobs dominated by women and those dominated by men. Why is taking care of children not as highly valued as taking care of money?"

So far, no other Nordic country has adopted the Icelandic equal pay standard, but the law has attracted much attention in the Nordic Region. "This is typical of how Nordic co-operation on gender equality works," says Marianna Traustadóttir.

"We look at each other to see what the other countries are doing and push each other."

Although there are still challenges, she recognises that conditions for women in the workplace have improved dramatically in the Nordic countries since the 1970s.

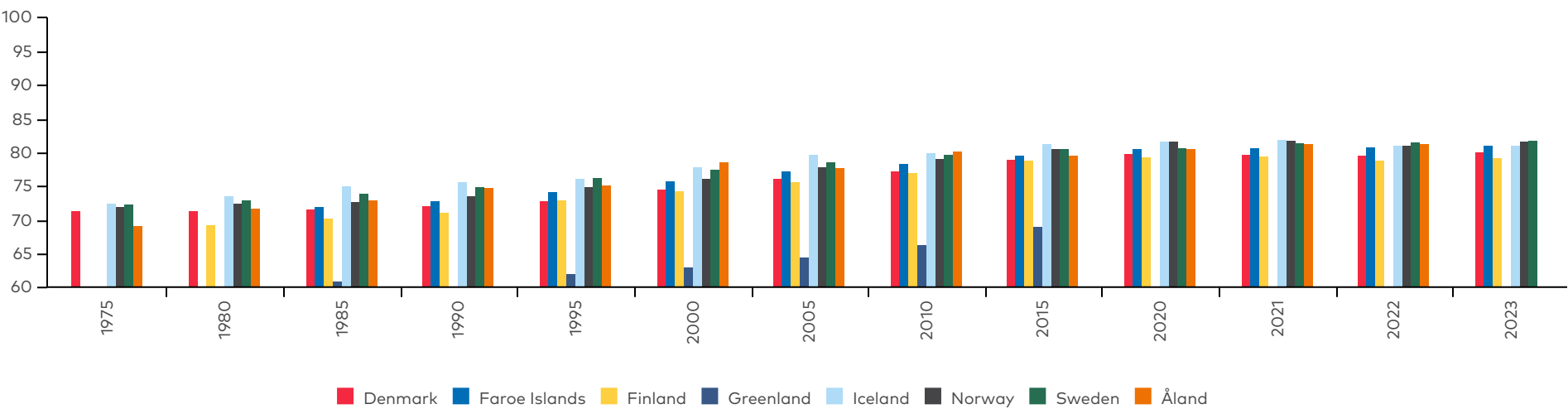
"There have been huge changes. Women's work is valued more highly. At the same time, women have increasingly taken up positions of power, both in the labour market and in politics."

Nordic database collects gender equality indicators

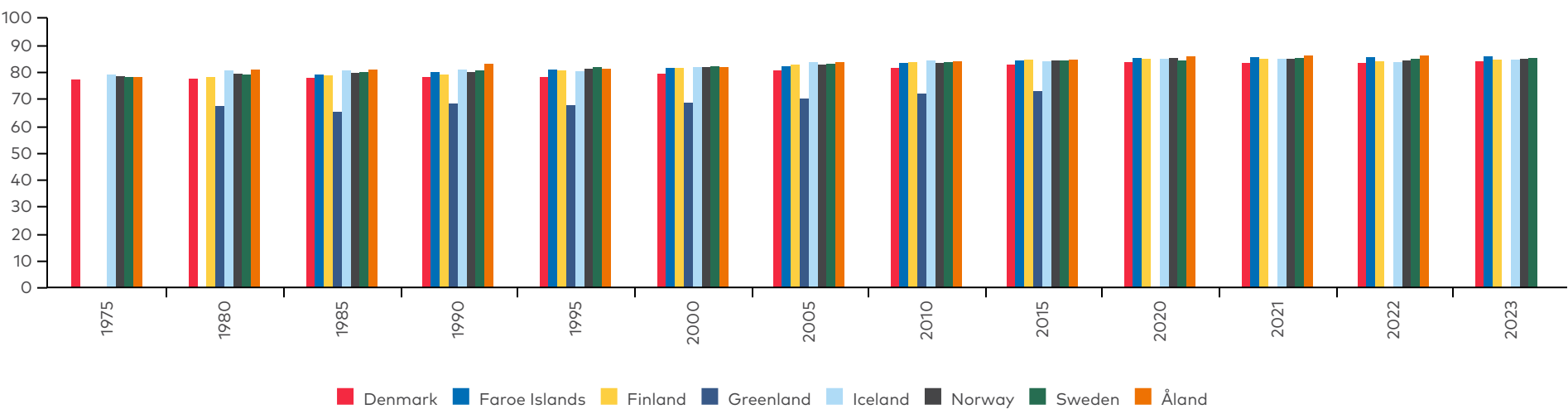
The Nordic Statistics Database contains data on Nordic gender equality indicators. The Nordic gender equality indicators show the progress made by the Nordic countries and remaining challenges in terms of demographics, family, health, education, the labour market, income and power and influence.

[Read more about the Statistics Database](#)

Life expectancy by time, age, sex and reporting country (men)



Life expectancy by time, age, sex and reporting country (women)



A photograph of a winding asphalt road on a rocky, grassy hillside. A person is walking on the road. In the background, there is a body of water, a small village, and a large mountain with a flat top. The sky is overcast.

**"Something happened when
we started working together,
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each other."**

Sören Laursen

Lesbian activists took the lead in gender equality work

During the 2000s, several equality reforms in support of LGBTI rights have been implemented in the Nordic countries. In January 2020, Nordic co-operation on gender equality was extended to include equal rights, treatment and opportunities for LGBTI people, but of course the fight has been going on longer than that. Søren Laursen has been involved in LGBTI rights in Denmark for over 30 years. He tells us how the LGBTI movement has often made common cause with the women's movement, although over the years there have also been conflicts.



Søren Laursen, *Co-founder and spokesperson, HBT committee, data architect, Nordic RCC*

When activists from the second-wave feminist movement gathered in the 1970s to demonstrate for equal pay and expanded childcare, lesbian activists were often on the front line.

"Many of the leaders of the women's movement were lesbians, and they have not received the recognition they deserve," says Søren Laursen.

For two periods, 1994-1998 and 2014-2017, he was chairman of LGBT+ Denmark, the country's largest LGBTI organisation.

Søren Laursen sees that gender equality and LGBTI issues have become more closely linked in the Nordic Region in recent decades. Over the years, the women's movement and the LGBTI movement have often made common cause, and within the Nordic state apparatus, gender equality and LGBTI issues are often intertwined and institutionalised through the same political structures. At the same time, over the years there have also been conflicts between them.

For example, when the first lesbian groups in the Nordic countries were formed in the 1970s, many people felt that others in the women's movement were not supportive. There was a perceived lack of solidarity, but looking back, Søren Laursen thinks it is clear that the LGBTI and women's movements have been mutually beneficial over the years.

He believes that the occasional conflicts that have arisen have been rooted in the fear that one's personal cause will be given less space. He experienced such a situation in the 1990s, for example, when discussions arose in several Nordic countries about how work on anti-discrimination and equal treatment should best be organised.

"At LGBT+ Denmark, we had finally pushed through our demand for a discrimination law that included sexual orientation. The next important issue for us was that we wanted an administrative complaints body to be established outside the courts to which victims of discrimination could turn. We wanted to see a common structure for all grounds of discrimination."

"But that idea didn't fly at all with equality organisations," he says. "There was fierce resistance within equality organisations to setting up such a joint body that would work broadly to cover all the different grounds of discrimination. There was also strong opposition to the idea among politicians committed to gender equality."

"I had many meetings with representatives from various gender equality organisations, but I couldn't convince them to want to join forces. They already had their structures and organisations and were afraid that gender equality issues would be overshadowed in the broad anti-discrimination work that those of us in the LGBTI movement were advocating. In a way, I can understand their point, although I was a strong advocate of this broader perspective. Our individual circumstances in society are affected by who we are in a complex way, which is why I don't think it's appropriate to divide up equality work based on different grounds of discrimination. At the same time, in the LGBTI movement we would obviously have a lot to gain by joining forces with other equality organisations, which had much stronger voices," he says.

Søren Laursen describes how the attitude of equality organisations towards the idea of broad anti-discrimination work slowly changed during the 2000s, as intersectional perspectives became more widely accepted.

The early 2000s saw a resumption of efforts to establish a complaints body for discrimination cases. Several civil society organisations, including representatives from the women's movement, participated in the regular meetings.

"For us in Denmark, this was where we in civil society managed to come together. Something happened when we started working together, in the same room. I think we really started to understand each other."

Although it took a few years, a proposal was finally agreed, which was recognised as a basis for the establishment of the complaints body *Ligebehandlingsnævnet* (Board of Equal Treatment) in 2008.

Søren Laursen notes that work on gender equality and the rights of minority groups have been linked via the shared framework of anti-discrimination.

The process he describes, by which work on gender equality and the rights of minority groups became intertwined, is not unique to Denmark; the same development took place more or less in parallel in other Nordic countries. The hesitant attitude to the LGBTI movement's proposals is also reflected among actors in gender equality work.

In Sweden, for example, disagreements arose over the organisation of authorities tasked with monitoring compliance with the Discrimination Act. For a period, there were four different authorities focusing on different grounds of discrimination: the Gender Equality Ombudsman (JämO), the Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination (DO), the Disability Ombudsman (HO) and the Ombudsman against Discrimination on Grounds of Sexual Orientation (HomO). There was a lengthy discussion on whether to merge the four ombudsmen into a single authority, a reorganisation that was carried out in 2009 despite opposition, when the new authority, the Equality Ombudsman (DO), was established.

In recent years, Søren Laursen sees a new division between the LGBTI movement and parts of the women's movement when it comes to transgender issues. He believes that this is because parts of the women's movement feel threatened by the progress that has been made on transgender rights, and perhaps the solution this time is to meet and talk. He believes that transphobia in parts of the women's movement and other forums is serious, and he sees a public debate in which the rights of transgender people are being questioned from several different directions and where there are links to a global movement that is pushing a transphobic agenda.

"I feel that the discussion has become very skewed. Instead of talking about the living conditions of transgender people, the focus is often on symbolic issues such as transgender people in elite sport, and I think that's unfortunate."

The Nordic countries have been co-operating on LGBTI policy since 2020, and this work is taking place through the same structures that have accommodated Nordic co-operation on gender equality since 1974.

Søren Laursen believes the fact that the Nordic countries did not start co-operating on LGBTI policy until 2020 may be due to them having previously looked to the EU and finding international co-operation at that level.

"Danish NGOs became very EU orientated and were deeply involved in the creation of ILGA-Europe, for example. Previously, we had been involved in the Nordic Council on Homosexuality, for example, but that faded into the background completely from the late 1990s."

He believes it is important that there is now a structure for co-operation on LGBTI policy in the Nordic Region.

"I think this co-operation is particularly needed right now because LGBTI rights are under significant pressure in large parts of Europe. This makes co-operation within the Nordic Region particularly important. The fact that the Nordic countries are embarking on this co-operation also signals that they want to continue to strengthen the rights of LGBTI people and are prepared to lead the way internationally."

Nordic cooperation to strengthen LGBTI rights

The Nordic Council of Ministers stimulates Nordic cooperation on LGBTI issues through a Nordic fund. The fund is aimed at a broad target group and calls for proposals are open to various types of organisations such as NGOs, networks and authorities. Funded projects must contribute to the promotion of equal rights, treatment and opportunities for LGBTI people in the Nordic Region.

Timeline, milestones for equality in the Nordic countries

Year and country indicate the first Nordic country to introduce a given reform

	1845	Equal inheritance rights for women and men introduced
	1856	The organised women's movement takes shape
	1857	Unmarried women come of age (at 25)
	1873	Women gain the right to take academic degrees
	1888	Married women come of age (at 25)
	1906	Universal and equal suffrage introduced
	1924	First female minister appointed
	1933	Homosexuality is decriminalised
	1939	Working women cannot be dismissed on grounds of pregnancy, childbirth or parental leave
	1948	The first LGBTI organisation is established,
	1958	Signing of the United Nations Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 100 on equal remuneration for men and women for work of equal value
	1959	Possibility of individual taxation introduced
	1961	Birth control pills are authorised
	1970	Free abortion introduced
	1972	Transgender people are given the opportunity to change their legal gender, Sweden
	1974	Parents are given the right to share leave upon the birth of a child with the introduction of parental insurance
	1976	Act on equality between women and men adopted

	1979	The disease label for homosexuality is removed
	1980	World's first democratically elected female president
	1989	Same-sex partnership legislation
	1989	All professions open to women – including in the military
	1999	Law banning the purchase of sexual services
	2009	Same-sex marriage legalised
	2013	Abolition of compulsory sterilisation in gender-confirming treatment
	2014	Ratification of the Council of Europe Convention (Istanbul Convention) on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence
	2014	Gender identity law based on self-identification introduced
	2015	Only country in the world with gender-neutral conscription
	2017	Psychiatric diagnosis of transsexualism removed
	2017	Law on equal pay standard for women and men introduced
	2018	Consent legislation introduced
	2019	The UN's specialised body for employment and labour issues, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), adopts the Convention on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work

Sexuality policy unites and divides the Nordic Region

The right to make decisions about one's own body and sexuality was central to the women's movement of the 1970s. In the decades since, major changes have taken place in the Nordic countries, particularly with regard to abortion rights. It is 50 years since the Swedish Parliament passed the right to free abortion in the spring of 1974 (one year after Denmark), and the right to abortion has had a major impact, says Lena Lennerhed, Professor of the History of Ideas at Södertörn University.



Lena Lennerhed, Professor of the history of ideas at Södertörn University

"As I see it, free abortion is about the right to make decisions over your own life. If something doesn't go as planned, we can now get help, and we don't have to be ashamed."

Lena Lennerhed has been researching ideas and perceptions of sexuality and gender since the 1990s and has written two books on attitudes to abortion in Sweden. She says that the road to achieving the 1974 abortion legislation was a long one.

The demand for free abortion was raised as early as the early 1960s, when the Social Democrats and Liberals were at the forefront of the respective student organisations.

"There was a big debate surrounding abortion, but at the time the issue was seen as radical," says Lena Lennerhed.

Under the rules as they existed then, anyone wishing to have an abortion had to apply to the 'abortion office', which investigated the individual case and proposed approval or rejection. The final decision was then taken by the National Board of Health and Welfare.

"There was fairly widespread support for this model, but the student organisations felt that only the woman herself could know what was best for her future and her life in a given case. They felt it was patronising to have to sit in front of the abortion clinic and justify their experiences. A child's right to be wanted was also an important argument in favour of free abortion."

The views represented by the student unions slowly gained ground in the 1960s and early 1970s, and the debate was strongly influenced by the testimonies of women who had travelled to Poland for care, where abortion was free.

Free abortion in almost all Nordic countries

All the Nordic countries provide free abortion except the Faroe Islands, which has one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe. In spring 2024, the government presented a proposal to introduce free abortion until week 12 but it was voted down in parliament. To change the current law, which dates back to 1956, more MPs needed to be in favour than against, but the result was a tie: 15 for and 15 against.

Denmark legislated for free abortion in 1973, Sweden in 1974, Norway in 1978, Iceland in 2019 and Finland in 2023. Greenland and Åland also have free abortion.

In Norway, abortion is free until week 12. Sweden has free abortion up to week 18 and Iceland up to week 22. Denmark decided in summer 2024 to raise the limit from week 12 to week 18. A corresponding change was also discussed in Norway.

"Many people thought it was wrong that Swedish women should have to travel abroad. At the same time, there was also criticism from those working in abortion care. Many in the healthcare sector believed that the system functioned poorly. They felt that it was difficult to establish good contact with patients and gain their trust."

Lena Lennerhed explains that the Swedish women's movement initially had a cautious attitude towards the student unions' demands for free abortion.

"It was young women who took the lead. At the end of the 1960s, there was significant turmoil surrounding the issue within the women's movement, but in the new women's movement of the 1970s there was strong support for abortion rights."

She was 20 years old when the Parliament decided in 1974 in favour of free abortion up to 18 weeks, but she does not remember it as a major event.

"To be honest, I don't remember it at all, which is a bit strange, but I think it's because many of us who grew up in the 1960s had already started to take abortion for granted. Practice had also changed gradually, so it had become easier to get an abortion even before the law was passed."

When comparing the historical development of abortion rights in the Nordic countries, Lena Lennerhed says it is important to bear in mind that legislation does not tell us everything about the conditions in a country. For example, Iceland and Finland, which legislated for free abortion late in the day – in 2019 and 2023 respectively – in practice had permissive attitudes for many years, which meant that most people who wanted to have an abortion were able to do so legally.

"At the same time, legislation on abortion is important because it sends a clear signal that it is the pregnant woman and no one else who should make the decision," says Lena Lennerhed.

The abortion laws of the Nordic countries vary, as do the dates when they were introduced, but this need not have been the case. In the mid-1960s, there were proposals to introduce uniform Nordic abortion legislation, and the issue was discussed by the Nordic Council. The fact that the idea was not realised is explained in the Swedish government report *Rätten till abort* (The Right to Abortion) from 1971, which stated that "the timetables for the reform work in the different countries were not coordinated." For example, Norway had recently reformed its abortion law, without introducing free abortion.

Although no uniform Nordic abortion law was introduced, the Nordic countries have largely moved in the same direction over the past 50 years. A fairly broad

consensus has emerged, as have several other policy issues regarding sexual health and sexuality. For example, the rights of LGBTI people have gradually been strengthened in all the Nordic countries. However, there are also policy issues where the countries have chosen different paths, for example in the case of sex for payment, an area in which legislation differs. In 1999, Sweden introduced a law that criminalises the purchase of sex but does not make it illegal to sell sex. Similar laws have also been introduced in Norway and Iceland, while buying sex is legal in Denmark, Finland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland.

Lena Lennerhed recognises that issues of bodily self-determination and bodily integrity have been discussed in many different contexts in the Nordic countries over the past 50 years. She mentions domestic violence as an area where knowledge has increased and work has developed. Domestic violence has repeatedly been highlighted as a priority issue by the Nordic governments. Alongside this, as of the 1970s, a women's shelter movement has emerged in civil society that provides support and protection to victims of violence.

Lena Lennerhed also recognises that over the past 50 years there have been crucial changes in the way rape and sexual violence are viewed. Rape laws in the Nordic countries have evolved over multiple stages, both in terms of what is considered rape and who is considered a victim. In Sweden, for example, the law became gender-neutral in 1984.

"It was an important change that recognised that not only women but also men can be raped – and that it is just as serious."

One question that has been raised in recent years in the debates on rape legislation in the Nordic countries is over the introduction of consent legislation. This means that the starting point for judging an act as rape is whether there has been mutual consent. Iceland and Sweden both introduced consent laws in 2018, followed by Denmark in 2021 and Finland in 2022. In Norway, the issue is also on the agenda and in spring 2024 demonstrations were held in several parts of the country in favour of consent laws after three men were acquitted in a high-profile gang rape case.

Globally, Lena Lennerhed sees a trend of sexual and reproductive rights being curtailed in a number of countries.

"Abortion rights are under threat in many places, but I don't feel that this is the case in Sweden and the Nordic countries, where support is strong."

Something she thinks we will be talking more about in the future in connection with bodily self-determination and bodily integrity is the development of reproductive technology and the new opportunities it offers. She mentions host motherhood, also known as surrogacy, as a highly topical issue where the Nordic governments can benefit from co-operation.

Whether or not surrogacy should be allowed is a matter of debate. There are strong voices within the women's movement against it, but there are also groups that put forward feminist arguments in its favour. Opponents see surrogacy as a form of trafficking of women's bodies. Those in favour emphasise that it should be up to each woman to make decisions about her own body. In the Nordic countries, it is not possible to have children through surrogacy via the health service. Surrogacy is unregulated, which means that while the procedure is not banned there are also no rules governing it, which can cause difficulties for families who have children using this method.

"I believe that we will have new legislation in this area. These children already exist and this is something politicians need to take into account," says Lena Lennerhed.

She also notes that developments in reproductive technology may bring entirely new issues and rights to the table. For example, as prenatal diagnoses improve, she wonders whether there is a risk of increasing pressure on pregnant women who carry children with disabilities. Could there be situations in which society opposes children being born who are likely to require significant resources from the healthcare system?

"As it is now, it is up to the pregnant woman to decide if she wants to keep her baby, but what if society decides that the responsibility for any costs will be left to the parents themselves if they choose to have a child with a disability?"

In that case, Lena Lennerhed notes, we would end up in a situation where we are discussing not only the right to terminate a pregnancy but also the right to carry it to term.

New institutions with gender equality on the agenda

It is no coincidence that Nordic co-operation on gender equality policy began officially in 1974. During the 1970s, gender equality issues were increasingly prioritised in the Nordic countries and institutions were established to further this work.



Hannele Varsa, Equality Council, Finland

Finland, for example, established the Council for Gender Equality (TANE) in 1972. It brought together representatives from various political parties as well as actors from other areas of society, including researchers, civil servants and civil society representatives. Their task was to gather and disseminate knowledge about gender equality.

"We often worked by identifying topical issues and gathering politicians and other actors to discuss them," says Hannele Varsa, who worked for the Council's secretariat from 1986 to 1995 and served as its Secretary General from 2003 to 2022.

Despite the tailwind behind gender equality, she recalls that the Council also faced resistance. Gender equality issues were not welcomed by everyone and many were simply uninterested.

For example, when the delegation raised the need for new measures to combat gender-based violence, the response was initially lukewarm.

"As experts, we recognised that it was a widespread societal problem, but many people didn't understand that," says Hannele Varsa.

She says that gender-based violence was an issue that the Finnish Council for Gender Equality started working on at an early stage. The issue was also on the agenda in the other Nordic countries in the 1970s and 1980s, and work to combat gender-based violence also characterised early Nordic co-operation on gender equality. Over the years, knowledge and experience have been exchanged through many different projects and conferences.

Hannele Varsa believes that developing knowledge has had an important impact in work against gender-based violence. She mentions in particular the report 'The Price of Violence. The Cost of Men's Violence against Women in Finland'. It was published in 2000 and was one of several reports produced after the Council for Gender Equality initiated a study on violence. Bringing visibility to the direct economic costs proved important.

"It woke up some politicians who had previously not been interested at all. It's sad that it had to become about money, but the inquiry succeeded in showing the scale of the problem, which made it an important report."

The Council for Gender Equality still exists, but its role has changed compared to the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, new institutions have been established. Responsibility for the implementation of Finnish gender equality policy lies mainly with the Gender Equality Unit of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

Another organisation that has been important in the formulation and implementation of Finnish gender equality policy is the Centre for Gender Equality Information, at the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. The Centre provided research-backed information on gender equality, but its operations were ceased in August 2024 for cost-saving reasons, a decision that sparked debate.

"Finland is now the only country in the Nordic region without a national information centre for gender equality. The decision will make research-backed decision-making in the field of gender equality more difficult," says Hannele Varsa.

Looking back on her years working at the Council for Gender Equality, Hannele Varsa recognises that the Council was often ahead of its time, initiating political discussions on issues that only led to reforms decades later. For example, she recalls that the issue of paternity leave was discussed long before the first paternity month was introduced in Finland in 2003.

"You are struck by how slow the processes of politics can be," she says.

Something that made a particular impression on her during her years at the Council for Gender Equality was the discussions within the Council's men's section, in which she was involved.

"It was the most interesting period of my professional life. We gathered representatives from many sides and explored the issues together. We had very fruitful conversations, for example about what it really means growing up as a boy in Finland."

Hannele Varsa recalls that those on the Council for Gender Equality followed developments in the field of gender equality in the other Nordic countries closely.

Gender mainstreaming in the Nordic countries

Over the years, gender equality legislation in the Nordic countries has evolved. At the same time, new institutions have been established, tasked with providing a basis for gender equality policy and ensuring that political decisions are implemented. How this work is organised differs from country to country. Since 2018, Sweden has had a Gender Equality Agency tasked with promoting the effective implementation of gender equality policy. In Norway, the work is carried out by the Bufdir agency, under the Ministry of Children and Equality. In Iceland, it is done through the Directorate of Equality, Jafnréttistofa, which is administered under the Minister of Social Affairs and Housing. In Greenland, the administrative body is the Greenland Gender Equality Council.

Over the past 50 years, gender equality has become a policy area that every Nordic government needs to respond to and provide policy for. In all the countries, there is now a clear path for how gender equality policy should be developed and implemented.

In the 1970s and 1980s, legislation was seen as the main tool for achieving gender equality, but in the 1990s gender mainstreaming was introduced as a new strategy. Gender mainstreaming means that all decisions taken, at both the national and local level, should be analysed in terms of their impact on women and men. In this way, gender equality work is conducted on an ongoing basis in all organisations, by all those involved in decision-making.

Gender mainstreaming as a strategy has been an important part of the Nordic countries' gender equality work, and the strategy has also come to characterise co-operation on gender equality in the Nordic Council.

"In particular, we looked at Sweden, which we felt had come further than us. For example, we pointed to the Swedish childcare system and said that we could do the same in Finland. We also had contact with Sweden on men's issues. The Swedish idea group for issues related to men's roles came to Finland in 1990 as guests of the men's section, so there was active interaction."

The Swedish idea group for issues related to male roles was linked to the Gender Equality Council, which served an advisory role for the Swedish government.

Varsa is convinced that Nordic co-operation has accelerated gender equality work in the respective countries. She also recognises that international bodies such as the UN and the EU have helped to put pressure on the Nordic governments.

"We often talk about how we in the Nordic countries have led the way, but in fact, reforms have often been implemented in our countries only after external pressure."

She points to CEDAW, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the UN in 1979, as an example.

"It was instrumental in bringing about the Gender Equality Act in Finland," she says.

The Finnish Gender Equality Act was passed by Parliament in 1986 and prohibited discrimination in the labour market. The following year, the Ombudsman for Equality was also established, tasked with combating gender discrimination. Similar laws and institutions were introduced in several other Nordic countries in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, Sweden's first Gender Equality Act came into force in 1980 and the Gender Equality Ombudsman was established in the same year.

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Gender mainstreaming as a strategy has been highly significant to the Nordic countries' gender equality work, and the strategy has also come to characterise co-operation on gender equality in the Nordic Council of Ministers. Over the past 50 years, Nordic co-operation programmes in the field of gender equality have tackled common challenges in many different areas, such as working life, health care and politics. Varsa recognises that many problems remain and that new gender equality issues will require politicians' attention in the future. She mentions, for example, gender equality linked to climate change as an important future issue. The topic was raised by the Council for Gender Equality as far back as the 1990s, and the issue has since become increasingly urgent.

"We recognise that men generally contribute more to climate change than women, while women are more affected globally."

She is convinced that Nordic co-operation on gender equality will deepen in the future.

"In parts of Europe, there is growing opposition to gender equality issues, and I think this backlash will make Nordic co-operation more important. Our similarities may become more apparent, because even though we see this resistance in our countries too, I think there is fairly solid support here for us to work towards gender equality. By working together, we can also better reach out internationally and continue to be an important global voice on these issues."

She cites as an example the tradition within the Nordic Council of Ministers of participating in joint Nordic programme items during the annual meeting of the UN's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York.

"The Nordic seminars are usually completely full. The programmes are very well attended, which I think shows the interest in our approach to gender equality issues."

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A person is standing on a wooden pier, holding a large orange Fjällräven Kånken backpack. The person is wearing a blue jacket, dark pants, white socks, and orange sneakers. The background shows a body of water and a distant island under a cloudy sky.

"We've not tried to reinvent the wheel but rather to take on board the results of research and implement the best ideas and practices from the other countries adapted to the conditions in Åland"

Vivan Nikula

The Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland: Unique perspectives in Nordic cooperation

The Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland have contributed unique perspectives to Nordic gender equality work, and exchanges within the Nordic Region have also had a major impact on the development of the islands. In recent decades, the autonomous regions have experienced further devolution. At the same time, their influence in Nordic cooperation has increased, but the role they should play in this cooperation is disputed.



Beinta í Jákupsstovu,
Professor emerita in political science at the University of Molde and adjunct professor at the University of the Faroe Islands.

In the summer of 1988, a ship carrying almost 200 politically active women left Tórshavn in the Faroe Islands. They were heading for Norway and the Nordic Forum conference, which the Faroe Islands attended with a large delegation. This period, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, marks an important shift for the Faroe Islands, as a time when women began to take up their role in politics in earnest.

"The Nordic Gender Equality Conference was used to mobilise," says Beinta í Jákupsstovu, professor emerita of political science at Molde University College and adjunct professor at the University of the Faroe Islands.

She tells us about the 'women's district court sessions' organised by the Faroese women's movement in the early 1980s. It was a kind of role-playing game where women were given the chance to practise being politicians under safe conditions.

"The Faroese women's movement was also inspired by the women's movement in Iceland, which had succeeded in increasing the proportion of women in its decision-making assemblies by going to the polls with its own list of women."

Many of the Faroese women who attended the Nordic Forum in 1988 stood in municipal elections around the Faroe Islands later that year. In several municipalities, separate lists of women were drawn up, and the proportion of women on municipal councils doubled from five per cent to 11.5 per cent.

Beinta í Jákupsstovu believes that Faroese women first entered politics at the municipal level in particular because many decisions that were important to women in their everyday lives were made within the municipalities.

"For example, access to childcare was decided there, which was a major issue for women, many of whom went from doing unpaid labour at home to being paid for their labour outside of the home in the 1970s and 1980s."

Since the 1980s, the proportion of women in politics has continued to increase in the Faroe Islands, but progress has been slow and marked by setbacks. In 2019, for example, there was not a single woman in the Faroese Government. All seven representatives were men.

"This sparked a huge debate, with some labelling the government the 'Taliban government'. Today's government, formed after the 2022 elections, has as many women as men," says Beinta í Jákupsstovu.

On two occasions, in 2006 and 2008, representatives from the Faroese authorities travelled to New York to explain to the UN why there is such a small proportion of women in their decision-making bodies.

"The issue has also been raised in the West Nordic Council, where the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland are represented," says Beinta í Jákupsstovu.

She believes that international pressure from the UN Commission on the Status

of Women and the West Nordic Council has had an impact on the shift towards greater influence for women.

The Faroe Islands have participated in cooperation within the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers since 1970, with Åland joining the same year. Greenland has also participated in this cooperation since 1984, but none of the three countries have full member status. They have the right to participate and express themselves at meetings but do not have the right to vote. The Sami Parliamentary Council also has observer status in Nordic cooperation, and discussions are currently being held on the role of the various regions in Nordic cooperation. The Faroe Islands and Greenland have asked to become full members.



Naaja Nathanielsen,
Greenland's Minister for
Gender Equality

"It's strange that we have to leave the room when the 'big boys' are talking," says Greenland's Minister for Gender Equality Naaja H Nathanielsen.

She says that cooperation in the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers is uneasy, but she believes in Nordic cooperation, not least in the area of gender equality.

"I think it helps that we largely share the same ideological starting point. In the Nordic Region, you don't have to explain why gender equality is important. You don't need to defend gender equality work, which you may need to do in other contexts," she says.

Naaja H Nathanielsen recognises that Greenland faces several challenges in the area of gender equality. As in the Faroe Islands, for example, women are still underrepresented in politics.

"Women in Greenland were not given the right to vote until 1948, which is remarkably late in a Nordic context. The first woman in parliament, Elisabeth Johansen, was not elected until 1959 and she was the only female representative until she left in 1975. Since then, more women have held positions of power, but we are nowhere near equal representation. Men dominate the government, parliament, municipalities, village councils and even corporate boardrooms."

In 2011, Greenland legislated on gender quotas for boards in the public sector and in publicly owned companies. According to Naaja H Nathanielsen, there are now many women leaders in these positions. She was the one who initiated the law, which met with significant resistance.

"It is the most difficult law I have ever pushed through. There was a concern that women who were elected would be perceived as less competent than men, as though they had only been elected to 'fill the women's quota', but the law was passed and nowadays it is hardly considered controversial."

She recognises that much has happened in the area of gender equality in Greenland in recent decades and mentions, among other things, that the taboos surrounding domestic violence, sexual harassment and incest have been broken.

"These are still sensitive topics, but not like before. Nowadays, these are issues that we can talk about and work to do something about, and that wasn't the case before," she says.

Vivan Nikula, a gender equality expert in Åland, also highlights domestic violence as an area where important work has been done in recent decades.

"When the issue of violence against women and their children was raised, the general perception was that this phenomenon did not exist in Åland," she says.

She led gender equality work in the Åland provincial government for over 20 years, from 1994. She was then employed part time as secretary of the gender equality delegation and later took on the role of head of the gender equality unit. She held the latter position until her retirement in 2020.

During her years in the administration, she led a wide range of gender equality initiatives, often in cooperation with other Nordic countries.



Vivan Nikula, Equality expert on Åland

"We've not tried to reinvent the wheel but rather to take on board the results of research and implement the best ideas and practices from the other countries adapted to the conditions in Åland."

One example is the work of '*Alternativ til Vold*' (Alternative to Violence), an initiative that tackles domestic violence by focussing on the perpetrators. The initiative started in Norway and has spread to other parts of the Nordic region, including Åland.

While it has benefited from the experiences of the other Nordic countries in gender equality work, Vivan Nikula also believes that Åland, like Greenland and the Faroe Islands, has an important role to play in Nordic cooperation by contributing its unique perspectives. She notes that there are particular challenges in working towards gender equality in a society with few inhabitants, where many people know or at least know of each other.

"It can be difficult to break norms and expectations in a small community," she says, noting that Ålandic women who have been committed to and driven change have sometimes had to pay a high price.

She notes that gender equality work is associated with particular challenges in a small community, but she also believes that smallness has advantages. Perhaps the work of change will be less cumbersome?

Nordic Forum

The 1988 Nordic Forum was held under the slogan 'Women Shaping Tomorrow' and brought together about 7,000 women in Oslo. The aim of the conference was to give Nordic women, both grassroots activists and politicians, the opportunity to develop ideas and strategies for creating a better society.

The conference was followed by another Nordic women's conference in Turku in 1994. It had the slogan 'Women's Life and Work – Joy and Freedom' and brought together over 15,000 participants, mainly from the Nordic and Baltic countries. In parallel with the broad conference, the Nordic ministers for gender equality organised a conference on Nordic cooperation on gender equality.

In 2014, another Nordic Forum was held, this time in Malmö and organised by the Nordic women's movement. The Forum attracted 30,000 participants from more than 50 countries and lasted four days. The conference resulted in a final document with demands on gender equality and recommendations to the Nordic governments.

"Sometimes I think that Åland has acted a bit like a laboratory in Nordic cooperation, as a place where you can test ideas and quickly read the results and perhaps change methods and strategies. One advantage of being small is that you can implement things fairly quickly and see what the effects are."

One thing Vivan Nikula has learnt over the years is the importance of statistics and facts in gender equality work.

"There are so many emotions linked to gender equality, which is why we need to approach the work with facts and knowledge," she says.

Not least in work against domestic violence, she sees that studies showing what conditions in Åland are actually like have been hugely important. She mentions in particular the survey by Åland's provincial government '*Våld i nära relationer*' (Violence in close relationships), which in 2017 showed that almost a third of women in Åland have been subjected to violence by an intimate partner.

"Statistics like this are very important to show the facts, so that politicians have a knowledge base when making decisions."

Naaaja H Nathanielsen also believes that facts and statistics are of great importance in gender equality work, and she sees that this is something they need more of in Greenland.

"Our statistics are inadequate, and our history is poorly documented. In many ways, we lack knowledge about the roles and conditions of women and men in society."

Both Vivan Nikula and Naaaja H Nathanielsen also emphasise that men have an important role to play in gender equality work. Vivan Nikula sees that gender equality issues have gained greater legitimacy in Åland thanks to the fact that there have been men with mandates to make decisions and make a difference who have fought for women's rights.

"Over the years, many politicians in Åland have become involved in various aspects of gender equality, pushed the issue and kept the debate going," she says.

A commitment to gender equality from men in positions of power is something Naaaja H Nathanielsen would like to see more often in Greenland.

"We have an absence of men who speak up for change," she says.

She sees that work for independence has put issues of influence and equality high on the political agenda in Greenland, but that gender equality issues have been somewhat overshadowed by the more dominant issue of autonomy in the territory. In the long term, she does not believe that the issues will be at odds

with each other; on the contrary, she sees that discussions on decolonisation have the potential to provide greater impetus to gender equality work.

"Both the work for gender equality and the work for Greenlandic autonomy are about influence and having our rights realised."

Beinta í Jákupsstovu is hopeful that gender equality work will continue to be strengthened in the Faroe Islands.

There is no doubt in her mind that Nordic cooperation has played a major role in promoting women's rights in the Faroe Islands. One example is the large painting that adorns one wall of the Mettustova house, which is owned by the Tórshavn Women's Association. It depicts a ship crossing the waves against a background of high mountains.

"It is the journey to the 1988 Nordic Forum."

Key messages

The interviewees in this publication look to the future and send messages to those who will drive gender equality work in the Nordic region forward:

1

DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES MAY DRIVE NEW POLICY INITIATIVES

Declining birth rates and demographic imbalances in the Nordic countries may lead to new family policy initiatives aimed at increasing fertility. Such policies may lead to an instrumental view of children and increased pressure on the reproductive role of women. If policies move in this direction, it would represent a reversal of Nordic family policy, which has focussed on the welfare of families with children rather than population numbers.

2

VULNERABLE GROUPS NEED TO BE INCLUDED IN GENDER EQUALITY WORK

In the future, there is a need to pursue gender equality work with a broader perspective on equality and to highlight the situation of particularly vulnerable groups.

3

MORE INITIATIVES TO REDUCE THE PAY GAP BETWEEN JOBS OF EQUAL VALUE

The gender pay gap is closing in the Nordic countries. Progress has been particularly good in achieving equal pay for equal work. But new initiatives are needed to close the pay gap between jobs of equal value.

4

NEED FOR CONTINUED DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION BETWEEN THE LGBTI MOVEMENT AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Despite the history of the women's movement and LGBTI movement making common cause in the struggle for equality reforms, there have been periods of opposition. In the past, part of the solution has been to start working together, in the same room, to build understanding. In recent years, a new division has emerged between the LGBTI movement and parts of the women's movement on trans issues. Perhaps the solution this time too is to come together and start a dialogue.

5

DEVELOPMENTS IN REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES MAY LEAD TO NEW REGULATORY CHALLENGES

With technological developments in reproduction, particularly in surrogacy and host motherhood, the Nordic countries will have to navigate new complex issues of bodily autonomy and ethics. Especially when it comes to balancing women's rights with protection from exploitation.

6

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS NEED TO BE DEFENDED

There is a global trend of restricting sexual and reproductive rights, such as the right to abortion, which is under threat in many places. The Nordic Region can contribute knowledge on these issues.

7

LINK GENDER EQUALITY TO CLIMATE CHANGE

It is a topic that was raised as far back as the 1990s, but has become even more relevant at a time when the consequences of humanity's impact on the climate are becoming more and more evident. We recognise that men generally contribute more to climate change than women, while women are globally more affected by its consequences.

8

NORDIC COOPERATION INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT IN TIMES OF RESISTANCE

There is now growing opposition to gender equality and LGBTI rights in many parts of the world. The ongoing push-back may make Nordic cooperation more important. By working together, we can reach out more effectively internationally and continue to be an important voice on these issues, just as international bodies such as the UN and the EU have historically helped to put pressure on the Nordic countries on gender equality issues.

9

QUESTIONS OF AUTONOMY CAN ENERGISE GENDER EQUALITY WORK

Gender equality issues have been somewhat overshadowed by the more dominant issue of devolution in the autonomous regions. In the long run, these issues need not be in conflict with each other. They have the potential to strengthen each other, as both are about empowerment and having people's rights realised.

10

GENDER EQUALITY WORK NEEDS TO BE KNOWLEDGE-BASED

More facts and statistics are needed in gender equality work. Increasing knowledge about the roles and conditions of women and men in society enables change.

NIKK

Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK) is a co-operation body under the Nordic Council of Ministers. NIKK collects and disseminates knowledge on policy and practice, facts and research in the field of gender equality and LGBTI issues with a Nordic and cross-sectoral perspective. NIKK's remit also includes administering the Nordic Gender Equality Fund and the Nordic LGBTI Fund.

[Read more about NIKK](#)

About this publication

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Nordic co-operation

Nordic co-operation is one of the world's most extensive forms of regional collaboration, involving Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

Nordic co-operation has firm traditions in politics, economics and culture and plays an important role in European and international forums. The Nordic community strives for a strong Nordic Region in a strong Europe.

Nordic co-operation promotes regional interests and values in a global world. The values shared by the Nordic countries help make the region one of the most innovative and competitive in the world.

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