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The invisible opponent – or why did male Swedish Social- Democratic top-politicians stop a gender equality reform they claimed to like?

Abstract

This paper studies the 'invisible' male opposition to gender equality reforms in fairly gender-equal institutional contexts. Such opposition is not always vociferous and outspoken, and thus it is often difficult to identify and study. Masculinity studies point to the fact that because male power is seen as a norm, we often fail to recognize the benefits that accrue to the male gender. We argue that one of these benefits is the power to choose to advocate gender-equality or not - without running the risk of being punished for the failure to adhere to feminist ideals but always standing the chance of being rewarded when doing so. We demonstrate such a discernible difference between the possibilities male and female politicians perceive they have when it comes to prioritizing gender equality issues. Male politicians enjoy the 'privilege to oppose' gender equality reforms to a much greater extent than do their female counterparts. To illustrate the argument, we analyze the failure to reform the parental leave system in Sweden in 2005. A public commission initiated by the recently self-declared feminist Social Democratic government had suggested earmarking more parental leave for each parent. Yet, the reform proposal was rejected during the party's own congress. The study builds on articles in media and interviews with Social Democratic top-

politicians. We show that the opposition to the reform is most visible among the male politicians – who are in a position to see gender equality as a prioritized issue when it suits them, but who do not risk losing any goodwill by sometimes depicting gender equality as a ‘question among others’. This privilege to oppose gender equality, without losing legitimacy as a politician, seems to be an option reserved for men in the Social Democratic party. Apart from building on and contributing to masculinity theories, the findings of this paper speak to the literature on the substantive representation of women.