

Norway leads the way among advanced countries on women's rights and progress, particularly with regard to employment opportunities, equal pay for equal work and participation in political institutions. This achievement is the product of a long and intense struggle by women in Norway to assert their rights and those of their children.

It also is the product of the Equal Status Council, established in 1972 to promote equality between men and women in all sectors; the family, work, education and the broader community. In pursuit of these objectives, the council mediates between government, women's organisations and the broader public. Its seven members, plus an administrative component, represent the major political parties, the Norwegian Federation of Trade Unions and the Confederation of Norwegian Business and Industry. The objective is to secure the consensus of all the key stakeholders of political and economic power in Norway.

Whether this is applicable to South Africa can be debated because it is rooted in a social contract political framework – a decision-making process based on mediating the different interests of labour, business and the state. In other words, significant policies have to be negotiated by all social actors to minimise conflict and ensure success.

In 1977 the council's efforts resulted in a Department of Family Affairs and Equal Status, located in the Ministry of Family and Consumer Affairs, which sought to coordinate and assess the government's

Women take their rightful place

Can Pretoria emulate Oslo in legislating for equality between the sexes? EDGAR PIETERSE gives his views.

equalisation policies. In the same year the ministry instructed municipalities to establish Municipal Equal Status Committees to advance the objectives of the Equal Status Act at local level. They enjoy the support, advice and guidance of the Equal Status Council and have had a reasonable influence where they have been implemented.

These mechanisms and institutions were further entrenched by the Equal Status Act of 1979. The introduction of the Act declares: "This Act shall promote equal status between the sexes and aims to improve the situation of women. The public authorities shall facilitate equality of status between the sexes in all sectors of society. Women and men shall be given equal opportunities for education, employment, cultural and professional advancement...Discrimination between men and women is not permitted." The law also set up two institutions – an Equal Status Ombudsman and an Equal Status Appeal Board – to enforce the Act.

Norwegian law also introduced a quota system to facilitate opportunities for women to develop into positions of influence and power. A minimum of 40 percent of either gender must be represented in

structures and committees across the board – political, religious, educational and economic.

The leftwing parties – Liberal, Left Socialist and the Labour Party – have a minimum of 40 percent of women at all levels within the party. In 1986 this principle was applied at cabinet level; today eight out of 18 ministers are women, including the current prime minister.

Affirmative action is practised by government, education and business sectors as a critical strategy to enable women to develop appropriate skills. Underscoring the Norwegian commitment to changing attitudes on the role of women is a national process of rewriting textbooks in all disciplines to rid them of sexist references and making changes where appropriate in teacher training.

The Norwegian women have a long history of struggle that goes back at least a century. The current culture, measures and institutions did not fall from the sky. Nor has the struggle against sexism ended. Norwegians point out that it has been a hard and bitter struggle to accomplish current achievements and a long and hard struggle awaits them to ensure full equality.

We in South Africa could learn a few lessons from Norway about advancing the power and rights of women. At the end of the day we will not be able to reconstruct our country on the foundation of good intentions; we need workable and democratic institutions and practices that will thrive in a culture of equality, work and learning.

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overrode the local in this instance," said a representative of the Town and Country grouping.

"The truth is that Norway is about the most decentralised system I know of. Our system has managed to keep the periphery alive in an almost unique way."

Local democracy in Norway faces a growing range of challenges. There is great concern in some quarters that if and when Norway joins the EEC the costly special provisions in respect of the periphery will fall away and a much more centralised system will evolve.

There is also an undercurrent of criticism about the professionalisation of local government. Politics is becoming the job of experts and there is a widespread feeling that lay people have lost their say.

The model democracy that is Norway has

been possible because of its small homogeneous population and an ever-rising affluence. This latter pillar is under threat. The economy is struggling. There is growing unemployment. The oil revenues that have underpinned economic growth in recent times are finite. This resource crunch is going to profoundly challenge the national consensus in future.

Amongst the ideas that have relevance to our current situation are:

- **The Free Communes Experiment** which allows certain municipalities to explore democratic and administrative mechanisms not permitted by legislation as pilot projects for the local government system as a whole.

- **The local government funding system** which ensures equity across the country and has played a decisive role in maintaining a strong periphery. The grant for each municipi-

pality is calculated by means of a formula where the idea is that every municipality has to provide a certain volume of services at an estimated average cost depending on the number and composition of the population.

"South Africa and Norway find themselves at opposite ends of the democratic process. You are struggling to create democracy for the first time. We are struggling to prevent our model democracy from distorting," we were told by the Town and Country representative. There is a truth in this. Perhaps the greatest lesson is that, for democracy, there is never room for complacency. It is not an end state that is achieved by a country at some point in its history but something that has always to be striven for.

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